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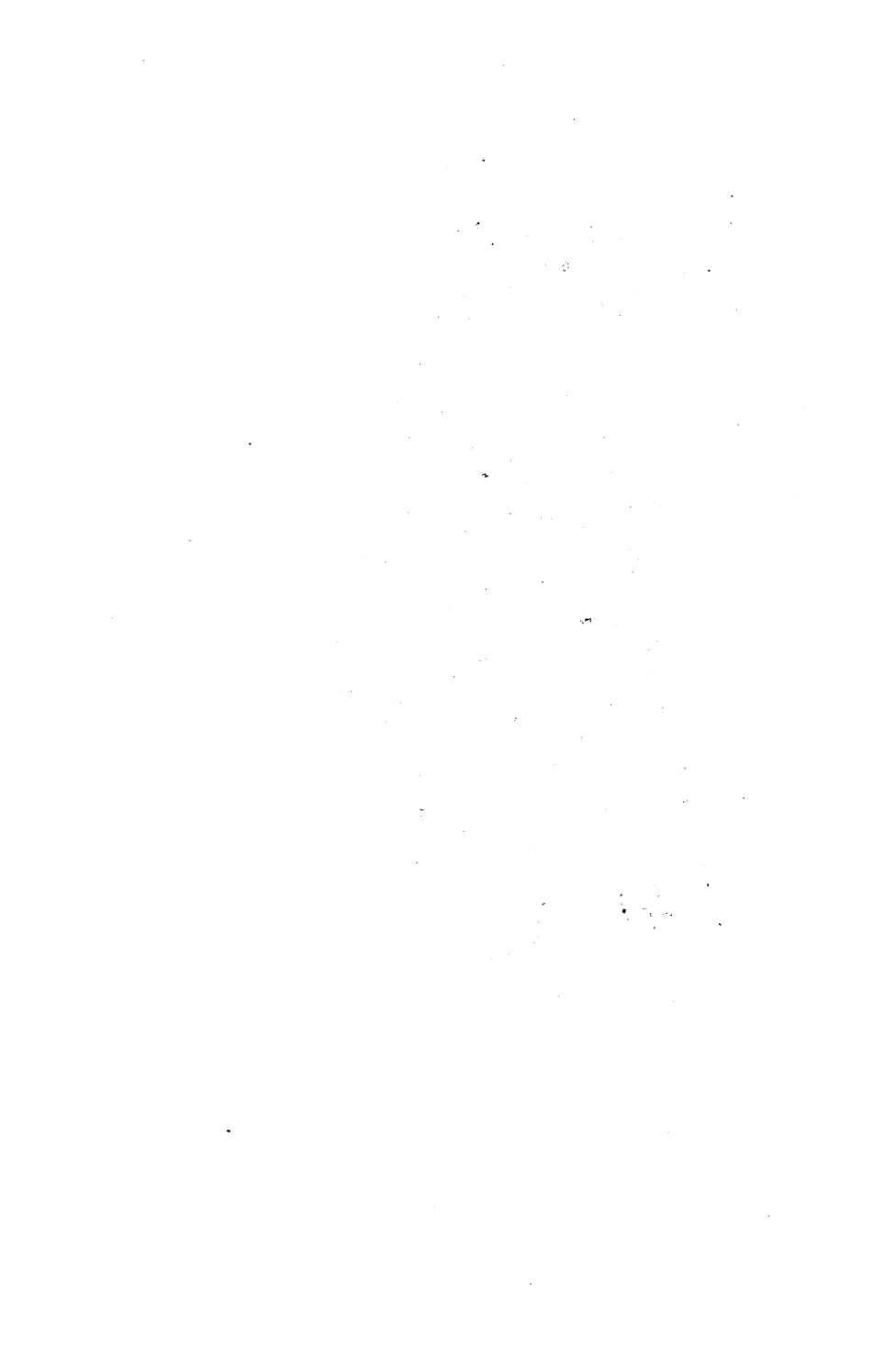
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THE LONELY LADY OF GROSVENOR SQUARE

BY
MRS. HENRY DE LA PASTURE
AUTHOR OF
"PETER'S MOTHER," "THE MAN FROM AMERICA,"
"A TOY TRAGEDY," Etc., Etc.

*Though I strive anew
Shadows to pursue,
Shadows vain,
Thou 'lt remain
Within my heart.*

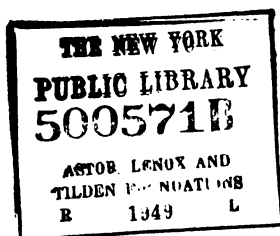
John Oxenford.

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The Lonely Lady Of Grosvenor Square

CHAPTER I

THE LONELY LADY

"It 's delightful to breathe the air,
Breathed by people in Grosvenor Square!"
Popular Song.

DECEMBER in London, 1902. Fog had prevailed throughout the early part of the day; now it had lifted, but a dismal rain was falling upon the coal-black stems of the lilac, the sooty branches of the plane, and the palings which divided them from the muddy pavement and muddier street.

A benevolent, bearded policeman, secure in mackintosh cape, paced slowly and solidly past the windows of 99 Grosvenor Square.

Within, a lonely lady sat at luncheon.

The table was spread with massive Georgian silver and Crown Derby china. Forced lilies of

the valley, red roses prematurely called into being, and clinging garlands of smilax curling in and out of the dessert dishes, added poetry to the prose of wealth's display.

The servants were not permitted to wait at luncheon.

The lonely lady left the brown chops to simmer over a plated furnace on the sideboard, and only looked at the glazed tongue and frilled ham reposing on beds of glittering aspic jelly.

This was not because she lacked appetite, but because she was afraid to broach them.

She helped herself timidly to boiled sole and mashed potato. She ate a little maraschino jelly in a furtive and guilty manner, and ended her meal by taking a peach, and some crumbs of a fine old Stilton cheese, in the wrong order.

She drank first water, stealthily and as though she were doing something wrong; and then, with frightened gulps of triumph, a small glass of light tawny port.

When she rose from the table she rang the bell so gently that the responding tinkle must have been very thin and uncertain; and she walked across the big, solemn dining-room, over the parquet floor of the square hall, past the porter's empty chair, and into the morning-room.

Here she sat down; alone, as usual.

The room was decorated in strict accord with modern taste and convention.

The ceiling was heavily incrustated with white ornament, like unto a wedding cake. Panels of green brocade bore old gilt candelabra on the walls. The narrow Adam's mantelshef held Louis Seize candlesticks, a Dresden clock, and Sèvres vases, beneath the life-size Romney portrait which occupied the space usually assigned to a mirror.

The fender rose in wild ornament of mimic flames made in solid gilt metal, around the white tiled fireplace. The moss green carpet bore heavy impress of a suite of Louis Seize furniture, gilt and brocaded.

Hothouse palms, rose-wreathed hangings, and the curved legs of enamelled tables lent graceful lines to pleasant spaces. Silver vases bore fragrant burdens of curled chrysanthemums, golden and bronze. A malachite pillar supported a tree-fern, and masses of azalea, pearl-petalled and scarlet-stained, bloomed in unnatural profusion in a shady corner—so quickly drooping—so easily renewed; because the owner of the house in Grosvenor Square was very rich, and had a great love for flowers.

The lonely lady had nothing to do with the decoration of the room, and flowers which disdained times and seasons, and bloomed for gold alone, bewildered as much as they pleased her.

She sat on the sofa and looked at them; rose and walked to the window and looked at the rain and the promenading policeman; returned to the

sofa and looked at the little empty idle hands in her lap.

She would gladly have taken down one of the volumes—bound in morocco and bright with gold tooling—from the shelves behind the glass doors of the Chippendale bookcases, which lurked in the alcoves on either side of the fireplace,—but alas, she had tried the doors, and found them securely locked.

Upon the low occasional table by the side of the rose-wreathed couch lay a copy of the *Book of Beauty*, published in the early forties.

It opened of itself at a steel engraving of the portrait of Miss Marney of Orsett, and represented a young lady seated upon a balcony beside a marble pillar, playing the harp.

Miss Marney wore a flowing muslin gown looped with roses, ringlets depended on either side of a handsome face, archly smiling over a bare shoulder; her gloves, lace handkerchief, and a stiff little bouquet were carefully disposed in the foreground.

The lonely lady had looked at the picture many times already, and read the verses facing it, which began:

*Fair girl, and hast thou left the festive scene,
To warble as a nightingale without
The noble halls of thine ancestral home,
Where thou art queen of frolic, dance, and rout?*

But she read them again with a momentary

renewal of interest, before she put the book back in its accustomed place.

The crackling of the fire within the room, and the distant clip-clop and jingle of hansoms outside, broke the silence; there was straw laid down in the street beneath the windows, because the owner of the house was ill.

The lonely lady looked up at the Romney portrait, and sighed childishly.

"I wish you could speak to me."

Her name was Jeanne-Marie-Charlotte de Courset; but the gilt plate on the frame of the Romney portrait bore the name of her English great-grandfather,

*Lt. Colonel Harry Marney, R.E.,
of Orsett Hall, near Bath.
Born 1771. Died 1851.*

The portrait must have been painted when Harry Marney was about twenty years old. He wore a grey powdered wig ending in a pigtail; a red coat with black velvet *revers* and gold epaulettes; a waistcoat and knee breeches of white satin, and a snowy neck-cloth.

The scene represented a battle-field, and the young face, oval and delicate as a woman's, stood boldly out against a background of lowering clouds and grey smoke.

Straight black brows met above dark blue eyes and an aquiline nose; a firmly closed mouth with slightly upturned corners gave a stern, almost

satirical expression to the proud, handsome face.

"It is no use looking so brave and so scornful," said Jeanne, "you know you were never in a battle in all your long life."

Then she relented and apologised.

"But I daresay you would have been if you could, for you are very like Louis. So like that it almost makes me cry to look at you, great-grandpapa Harry. I suppose promotion was very quick in your time for gentlemen of fortune, or perhaps the inscription was put a long time after the picture was painted. Surely you could not have been a Colonel at that age. I must ask Aunt Caroline."

The only surviving daughter of Colonel Harry lay upstairs on her sick bed. She was now eighty years old, as the original of the portrait had been when death had summoned him from the hunting-field to take his place in the family vault.

Jeanne had been nearly three weeks in the house of her great-aunt, but it seemed to her almost as though as many years must have elapsed since she had left the farm on the borders of Wales, where she and her twin brother Louis had been brought up.

She was used to loneliness. Coed-Ithel lay among the mountains, more than two miles from the nearest village, and the roads were bad and distances great for travellers to town and market.

The homestead belonged to her bachelor uncle, a hard-working farmer, who was generally out of doors, and who mostly fell asleep if forced, from any cause, to remain within; so that his niece could scarcely look to him for companionship, even if he had been as congenial to her as he was kind.

She had not seen her brother Louis, who was now in South Africa, since he had left home to join his regiment in India, nearly five years ago.

Thus she had grown accustomed to a certain solitude; but the loneliness of the hillside is not the loneliness of a large house in the midst of a crowd of strangers.

A restless impatience of the conditions which surrounded her began to pervade her empty days and her wakeful nights.

She was five and twenty years old, but in consequence of her forlornness, and the roundness of her little face, she looked much younger. Her sojourn in town had not yet succeeded in dimming the beautiful red bloom which the air of her native mountains had lent her complexion. The clear blue whites of her soft brown eyes, fringed with long black lashes, betrayed the perfect healthfulness of their owner. Dimples lurked on the round chin, and in the round young cheeks; but there was no smile to bring them forth from their hiding-places; the corners of the pretty mouth drooped, and expressed as

much sadness as such a childish face could hold.

Jeanne had seen her aunt but once during the last three weeks. Upon the day of her arrival she had been sent for to Miss Marney's own apartment—to which that lady had been confined by illness for some time past, although she had not then yet taken to her bed.

Her first view of Miss Caroline presented to her a tall and dignified figure, erect in an elbow chair, and clad in a flowing gown of grey satin, with flounces of Honiton lace; upon which couch of luxury her favourite dog, a little Yorkshire terrier, was very calmly reposing.

A lace cap, with pale pink velvet bows, crowned Miss Caroline's white hair, parted above black brows which met across a hawk nose, and blue eyes still piercing—still blackly fringed.

Jeanne had trembled not a little before this stately apparition, and her obvious alarm and admiration had impressed her grand-aunt favourably.

But of the interview she had but a vague recollection, for between terror and fatigue she could scarce bring herself to answer the few formal questions put to her concerning her journey.

Miss Marney would hardly have permitted an earthquake—far less the arrival of a humble stranger niece—to derange one of the established customs of her regular existence. It was the hour for double-dummy, and Jeanne was therefore

requested to establish herself in an arm-chair in the background, and given a prolonged opportunity for recovering her composure, during her aunt's nightly recreation of card-playing.

As the clock struck nine, Mrs. Pyke, the house-keeper, entered, dressed in black broché, which was curiously patterned with violet flowers in accordance with an ancient fashion; also she wore a black lace cap upon her head, and a long gold watch-chain about her neck.

The maid, Dunham, had already set forth the card-table, and Mrs. Pyke, pausing in the doorway to make a curtsy, glided decorously into her place, and gathered the cards into slightly palsied hands, veiled by black mittens.

Pyke had entered her ninetieth year, but it had not yet occurred to her that she was too old to fulfil her duties.

She was a strangely silent person, and her length of service did not inspire her to abate one iota of her perpetual awestruck deference to her employer, though nothing could have exceeded Miss Marneys graciousness to her oldest dependent.

The rubber had been played in silence; Jeanne scarcely daring to breathe. She noted with wonder and delight the magnificence of her grand-aunt's appearance, and the stateliness of her bearing. She had indeed never seen any one like her; every time Miss Marney tossed her head.

and this was a favourite gesture oft repeated, Jeanne thrilled responsively. She practised the movement afterwards before her looking-glass in private, and was disgusted at her own inability to produce double chins in rapid succession.

The scene interested her deeply: the card-table, lighted with green-shaded candles, struck her with pleasant dismay.

Her Non-conformist uncle at Coed-Ithel called cards the devil's books; and she had never seen this class of literature before.

She felt almost as guilty as though she were being called upon to assist at a witch's orgy, instead of an old lady's innocent rubber, as she watched the housekeeper's shrivelled black figure, and dim spectacled eyes, peering at the cards held in her mittened hands. She observed with interest the small sour smile on Mrs. Pyke's sunken mouth when her mistress condescended to put an ace on her king, and heard her faint clack of apology when she secured the odd trick for herself.

Jeanne wondered why both the old servants affected violet as their only decoration, and came to the conclusion that it must be because they thought it the most respectful colour for servants to wear, next to unrelieved black.

Dunham, another silent witness of the game, had been interested only in the flush on Miss Marney's face, and the stertorous difficult breathing which

was painfully audible in the heavily curtained double-windowed room.

The rubber was cut short by some astounding *coups* and a timely revoke, on the part of Mrs. Pyke, in deference to private signals from Dunham, who was seated a little behind her mistress; when it was over another time-honoured ceremony was gone through. A glass of madeira was poured out very solemnly, and presented to the aged housekeeper, as a recompense and refreshment after her labours.

Pyke received this mark of favour with perennial surprise and gratitude; venturing to express a humble wish for Miss Marney's good health before she swallowed the wine, and making a second curtsy before she retired finally from the apartment.

Jeanne, too, had been dismissed—but with a gracious smile, an intimation that she should in future address her relative as Aunt Caroline, rather than as Aunt Marney—and a promise that an early interview should be accorded in the morning.

During the night, however, a great bustle and commotion arose in the old house, of which little Jeanne, sleeping soundly after her journey, and forgotten by the terrified domestics, knew nothing.

She learnt next day that her grand-aunt was very ill, and that she had had some kind of a stroke or seizure. Dunham was reticent concerning

details, but she explained that Jeanne must not go to Miss Marney's room unless she was sent for; and Jeanne, unaccustomed to independent action of any kind (for she had been always subject to authority), had acquiesced as a matter of course.

During the weeks that followed, she had moped unquiet, alone, and disconsolate; poring over the newspapers for hours, rather in hopes of finding her brother's name in the South African intelligence, than because she was particularly interested in the general news of the day; afraid of venturing forth alone into the unfamiliar streets; choked by the fog, depressed by the weather, and hourly expectant of the summons to her aunt's bedside.

The long afternoon wore away, and at half-past four the tea was brought in by Hewitt the butler, and William the Irish footman. William was still a footman, though forty summers had passed lightly over his carrotty head and freckled face; for his twinkling eyes, snub nose, and wide smiling mouth belied all his efforts to emulate the serious dignity of his superior, and debarred him for ever from rising to the first rank in his profession.

A little animation came into the lonely lady's woe-begone face when the servants withdrew, leaving her respectfully alone to enjoy her meal.

She enjoyed it less because she was hungry

than because eating and drinking gave her something to do.

To farm-bred Jeanne, the tea, however dainty, appeared but the contemptible shadow of her favourite repast; though, since she had taken next to no exercise for some days past, and had lunched but two hours earlier, a less healthy appetite would scarcely have needed it at all.

She handled the heavy Georgian urn nervously, made the tea, and poured it into a shallow cup of egg-shell china. She spurned the London cream, delicately flavoured with boracic acid, and haughtily left one of the four minute wafers which did duty for bread and butter on its snowy folded napkin, lest Hewitt and William should be led to suppose her accustomed to more solid fare.

It was a greater effort of self-denial to spare the third sponge cake.

Miss Marney's still-room maid made excellent sponge cakes, though they were shaped and sized rather to suit dolls than human beings with a taste for sweet things.

Spin it out as she would, the meal was over in the space of a quarter of an hour; and when the door opened presently, Jeanne thought the servants had come to clear away the tea-things. She did not turn her head from the window, still blurred with rain, to which she had returned; but stood there, looking out dismally, at the rows of twinkling lights in perspective, reflected in the wet .

mud of the street until they were lost in grey mist and smoke.

The sound of a throat cleared—respectfully but unmistakably in readiness for speaking, made her start; and she beheld her aunt's maid standing at her elbow.

The old-fashioned waiting-woman—who was scarce ten years younger than her mistress, and had tended Miss Marney faithfully for upwards of half a century—addressed Jeanne kindly but stiffly, and somewhat as though she were speaking to a very little child.

"Your auntie is asking for you, Missy."

"For me? At last. Will she really see me again? I will come at once," said Jeanne, very joyfully.

The *ennui* vanished, and the dimples appeared.

"Then she must be better. Is she better, Mrs. Dunham, do you think?"

Dunham shook her head. Down her wrinkled face stole the slow tears of age, falling unheeded, one after another, on to her black silk bodice and violet silk apron.

A certain independence of character, joined to great industry and a respectful manner, had recommended Dunham to her mistress from their earliest acquaintance. They quarrelled just sufficiently often, and Dunham was just sufficiently outspoken, to enliven their daily intercourse; but the maid was tactful as well as frank, and knew exactly how far she might go.

Now that her lady lay dying, Dunham felt very desolate; her interests outside the little world of Miss Marney's household had lessened with the passing of years almost to vanishing point.

The thought of change chilled and saddened her. She would have been shocked indeed had any one accused her of wishing to die before her time; but yet, had she been given any choice in the matter by Providence, it is probable that she would have chosen to accompany Miss Marney on the journey which lay before her now,—as she had accompanied her on shorter journeys, during the past fifty years of her existence.

Jeanne's pretty face reflected the maid's sadness. Her heart was tender, and her impulses were quick and warm, though perhaps not always as wise as they were kind. She would have embraced and consoled the old woman had she dared. But the distance between them seemed too awful to be thus bridged over by an impulse, and Dunham looked too inscrutably respectful and dignified to be embraced by any one,—far less by so young and insignificant a stranger as Jeanne felt herself to be. Wherefore she followed her guide meekly and silently, up the winding stone staircase of the old house, to the second floor.

She felt both frightened and pitiful, for Dunham's expression betrayed that she believed her mistress to be on the point of death.

CHAPTER II

THE PEDIGREE

MISS MARNEY'S aquiline nose and blue eyes were visible over the edge of the sheet as Jeanne entered the bedroom. A nightcap was tied with pink ribbons under her ample chin, and a hand with a white kid glove on it, caressed her little growling Yorkshire terrier, which was curled upon the quilt.

All her life Miss Caroline had prided herself upon the beauty of her hands, and they were exquisite yet, though seldom visible, for she was busy preserving them still.

"Would you like the candles ma'am, or the light turned on?" said Dunham, advancing to the bed.

"No, there is a good fire; the room is light enough, one can talk better by firelight," said Miss Marney, in a tone so brisk that it made Jeanne jump. She had expected to find her aunt in a semi-moribund condition, and was no less astonished than relieved to find her in such cheerful-wise, and so well able to speak naturally, and give orders as usual.

She decided that Dunham must have taken an unnecessarily gloomy view of the situation.

"Don't fidget about, Dunham," said the invalid, imperiously, "but go out of the room and shut the door after you. I want to make acquaintance with my grand-niece."

"You won't tire yourself, ma'am?"

"When I feel tired, Miss Jane will ring."

Dunham turned a warning face towards Jeanne, before leaving the room, and Jeanne nodded acquiescence and encouragement.

The door was shut, and she found herself alone with her great-aunt.

"I like to see your fresh face, my love," said Miss Caroline graciously. "You have the Marney complexion. When I was young the reddest rose could not vie with my colour. There is no such thing as a complexion nowadays. Young women are all pasty-faced."

Jeanne's confidence was restored by this complimentary address. Though she was alarmed by the butler and footman, and even rather fearful of Dunham and Mrs. Pyke, she became at once easy and natural in the presence of her august relative; for like many ultra-sensitive persons, she alternated between the extremes of courage and timidity.

"You are neither thin nor sallow," said Miss Marney. "No one in fact, could believe you had

a drop of French blood in your veins, and yet undeniably, there it is."

Her voice was surprised and rather triumphant, as though she were under the impression that French blood must be yellow rather than red, and of a necessarily inferior quality. "You are not in the least like your father."

"But it is a great disappointment to Louis and me," said Jeanne, unconscious of her aunt's prejudices, "that we are not like our French ancestors. We sigh over it every time we look at the miniatures which belonged to poor papa."

"Have you those miniatures still?"

"Why, they are our greatest treasures," said Jeanne, surprised in her turn. "Louis said I must never let them out of my sight, so I brought them to London with me. We are very, very proud to belong to them, but we know we are not like them. However, I mind less now that I know who Louis *is* like."

"Does your twin brother not resemble you?"

"Not a bit," said Jeanne, and she winked away a tear at the mere mention of her brother, after the weeks of silence she had unwillingly endured. "It is the portrait over the mantelpiece in the morning-room that Louis is like. He is so like that it might just as well be *his* portrait."

"Like the Romney picture of my father," said Miss Marney, rather sharply. She drew herself up eagerly on her pillows, and the gloved hand

that settled the pink bow of her night-cap, trembled nervously. "How very extraordinary! Your father was not like our family; and your mother was a farmer's daughter with, as I have always heard, no great pretensions to looks—"

"Just a little round thing like me," said Jeanne, humbly enough.

"Yet their son resembles his great-grandfather! I find it difficult to believe that the likeness can be anything very striking, my love. I should like to judge for myself."

"He will be coming home very soon I hope," said Jeanne.

Miss Marney moved uneasily, and the thought crossed Jeanne's mind that perhaps even the "very soon" might be too late for her aunt.

"Perhaps you have a photograph," said Miss Marney.

"Of course, how stupid of me. It was taken five years ago, so he may be changed. But he was twenty—and I suppose the young man in the picture—I beg your pardon—" said Jeanne, confused—"I mean my great-grandfather, must have been the same age when that was painted."

She unfastened the bodice of her plain serge frock, and took a common silver locket from its little white nest next her heart.

This she produced very simply and handed to her aunt.

Miss Marney groped for her spectacle-case

beneath the pillow, and adjusted the glasses on the high bridge of her hawk nose. Then she pressed an electric button in a knob beside her, and by the light of a tiny glass globe above the bed, stared for some moments at the photograph.

An ever-increasing interest and pleasure were expressed upon her good-looking old face.

"My dear, you are quite right. He is remarkably like, remarkably like. What an instance of the freaks of heredity! The son of Louis de Courset, whose foreign appearance we deplored, and of a farmer's daughter with no appearance at all, and he grows up the living image of my beloved father, who was one of the finest-looking men of his day. Pray how tall is he?"

"Six foot two in his stockings," said Jeanne, proudly. "He is very strong and athletic, Aunt Caroline, and has won silver cups—I have them at home—for running and jumping. And think how well he has done for himself in the Army, poor boy, with no interest, and only his own brains to help him along."

"Looks are of quite as much assistance as brains, my dear Jane," said Miss Marney, "and he owes his looks to us;" she seemed soothed and gratified by this reflection. "Your brother is very handsome, my love. He is a true Marney. I should like to keep this photograph."

Jeanne's brown eyes grew round with dismay.

"I could not sleep without the locket in my

hand," she faltered. "It was his parting present, Aunt Caroline."

Then she was shocked at her own selfishness. Who was she to be refusing what might prove to be, perhaps, the last request of her dying relative. Though the pink bows on the night-cap, and the liveliness of Miss Caroline's blue eyes looked very little like dying to Jeanne.

"Keep it as long as you like," she gasped, and closed the gloved fingers gently over her treasure. "If it is any comfort to you to have it—if it reminds you of your father—I could not grudge it to you. After all—" she choked back a sob—"I do not need anything to remind me of Louis *really*. He is *here*—in my heart," she clasped her little hands tragically upon her round young breast. "I think of him always, day and night."

"You shall have it back soon," said Miss Marney.

The simplicity of her niece pleased her. She was impulsive herself, and generous, though many years of complete independence and great wealth had caused her to become likewise capricious and self-indulgent.

"I see you mean to be kind to me," she said, with amused graciousness, "and I mean to be kind to you. Now tell me what you think of the house."

"I think it is very beautiful *inside*, and filled with beautiful things," said Jeanne sincerely.

"You have not, of course, seen the saloons? I keep them covered up. The tapestry chairs there were all worked in the eighteenth century, and are very exquisite. I keep the pictures covered up too. I believe they would suffer from the London blacks, to which I cannot accustom myself even after twenty years' experience. And I will not risk the family collection. Some day I will show it to you. I have added to it myself, as regularly as I was able."

"I should like to see it," said Jeanne.

"But I had the morning-room made ready for you to sit in. I am very partial to that room. It is done up according to modern taste, for though I am so old, I pride myself upon not falling behind the times," said Miss Marney bridling, "I sit there always, and I hope you like it, my love."

"I like it very much indeed," said Jeanne, and she sighed unconsciously. "Are you always alone, Aunt Caroline?"

"I am almost entirely alone, my love. I do not care to make new friends, and I have outlived most of my old ones. Those who survive are down in the West country, and correspondence is not my *forte*. I drive out a good deal. I hope you order the carriage when you require it?"

"Thank you very much—" stammered Jeanne, "but—I—I—"

"Quite so, my love; the fogs have been rather

bad, I understand; but you will feel inclined to go and see your friends as the weather improves."

"I know only one person—I scarcely know if she is a friend still—in London," said scrupulous Jeanne.

"You are young, my love, and will find more friends; and later on you will have plenty of visits to make, I have no doubt. But you are quite right to be exclusive," said her aunt, "I do not care to be hail-fellow-well-met myself with everybody I see. We must try and amuse each other, for the hours seem very long to me, lying here."

"And they seem very long to me downstairs," sighed Jeanne. "For I do not like to talk to the servants even if they seemed inclined—which they don't—"

"I should think not, my love, it would not do at all. Never encourage familiarity. But have you nothing to do? You should never sit idle. It is a bad habit for a young person. Have you not even brought your tatting?" said Miss Marney, solicitously.

Jeanne knew not what tatting might be, but she shook her head, for whatever it was, she had certainly not brought it.

"I brought nothing but absolute necessities. I did not know how long I was to stay. Uncle Roberts said I was to go at once when your telegram came; so I started as soon as the cart could be got ready, and brought as few things as

possible. Just a small box, and my desk in my hand."

"You must be sadly uncomfortable, my love," said Miss Caroline, sympathetically. "Still it will give you some shopping to do. Pray hand me the bag on my quilt."

Jeanne attempted to do so, but the little terrier growled ominously.

"Sensible dog," said Miss Marney, in approving tones, "you see how he guards my property."

But she quieted her pet, and the bag was extricated. Miss Caroline opened it without removing the white kid glove, and took out a bundle of crackling bank-notes.

Selecting a couple, she handed them to Jeanne.

"You must get yourself any trifle you require, my dear Jane. No thanks, I beg. Put them in the pocket of your gown. And pray write and desire that your wardrobe may be sent. I am in hopes to persuade you to stay on."

Jeanne's heart sank, but she tried to conceal her dismay as well as she could; and faltered forth her thanks for her relative's proposed hospitality.

"I am desirous to know," said Miss Marney, settling herself among her pillows, and half closing her eyes, "how far you are aware of your near connection with our family. I am too weak to be able to talk much myself, but I can give you my attention very well." Her accents

were regretful, and Jeanne divined that Miss Caroline was more accustomed to hold forth herself than to listen to others. "Speak clearly, my love. People nowadays mumble so dreadfully."

Without suspecting her aunt of deafness, Jeanne obediently raised her voice.

"I know more about our own family than about yours; but Uncle Roberts has told us what he had heard of both. Then there are the labels on the miniatures, and an odd volume of a kind of old French history of the *ancienne noblesse*, containing an account of the de Coursets. It brings down the pedigree as far as my great-grandfather."

"Ah," said Miss Marney, dryly.

"There were two brothers and a sister; Pierre, Charles, and Anne-Marie. Our great-grandfather was Pierre, the Marquis de Courset. He was page to Madame Royale, the daughter of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. He escaped with his young wife during the Revolution in 1793, and came to England; and gave drawing lessons in Bath to support them both. But he had been an officer in the French cavalry, and could n't be happy without soldiering, so he left his wife and their little son Henri, and joined the campaign of the French princes in Germany, and was killed. But he desired that his son should be brought up an Englishman."

"Quite right. I know all this, and, as you may suppose, it is not very interesting to me, but it must be got through before we come to *our* family," said Miss Marney, tossing her head among the pillows.

"Would you rather I stopped?" Jeanne said, somewhat discouraged by this reception of her enthusiastic recital of a history which was to her the most interesting and romantic in the world.

"No, my love, I am equally struck with the retentiveness of your memory, and your respect for the past. Pray continue."

"The brother of the Marquis, my great grand-uncle Charles, was in the French navy," said Jeanne "and served on board the *Calipso*, at Martinique; a battle-ship which remained faithful to the royal cause throughout the Revolution. Louis XVIII made him a Chevalier of St. Louis and of the Legion of Honour; and that is all the book says about him. I don't know if he married and had children. Anyway he did not emigrate, he stayed in France."

"I never heard of him, but a Frenchman is a Frenchman," said Miss Marney, sternly and incontrovertibly.

"The little sister, the Comtesse Anne-Marie," said Jeanne, yet more disconcerted, "was a *Chanoinesse*, but we do not know exactly what that means. She is the one we like best. She was the first noble lady to be arrested in the

Revolution, and she was imprisoned in the *Citadelle* of Calais during the Terror, and died there. She looks so gay and beautiful and disdainful, and has a mouth like a Cupid's bow."

"Ladies in miniatures always have that kind of mouth, my love," said Miss Marney. "Her fate was very shocking. But we will return to the little son Henry. He was left in Bath under the care of his widowed mother, who, most fortunately for herself, eventually married an English gentleman."

"But it was n't very faithful of her," said Jeanne indignantly.

"Possibly not, my love. Foreigners are more apt, I believe, to be frivolous than faithful. Still, she married an English esquire of fortune and repute, who was a true father to Henry, and sent him to Eton, and put him into a cavalry regiment. He grew up quite English though he was called the Count de Courset."

"Yes," said Jeanne, trying to keep the sound of regret out of her voice.

"He was a Colonel in the 29th Hussars when we made his acquaintance," said Miss Marney, who now took up the recital with much energy in spite of her weakness. "He became a Lieutenant-General and married my dear sister Jane, who died in childbed, in 1851. Poor Henry fell before Sevastopol in '55, and my brother and I adopted their little Louis."

"That was my father," said Jeanne.

"I can hardly expect you to realise, my love, in the light of after events, how devotedly attached we were to the orphan son of our gentle beloved Jane. But Louis was not, unhappily, a true Marney: his foreign blood was a distress to us both, and his disposition, alas, though attractive to some people, too clearly denoted his French origin. His character was not congenial to my dear brother, a very grave and serious man. Louis had a happy nature, light-hearted, facile, and, and—but in short, the exact opposite of your poor uncle. *Louis le débonnaire*, I used to call him, fondly and playfully." She sighed. "I over-indulged him, my love, for it seemed to me as though Providence had bestowed him upon us. My dear brother designed him for his heir; being himself a great invalid, and unlikely to marry. We planned that Louis should assume his mother's name, and become one day Marney of Orsett."

"And you cast him off because he married my mother," said Jeanne, holding her head very high, in spite of her timidity.

"My dear Jane, I cannot discuss your father's conduct with you," said Miss Marney, with great dignity, "it would be neither charitable, nor seemly. When I tell you that all our hopes were centred in him, you must imagine for yourself, as well as you can, that we did not lightly

decide to abandon them for ever. It pleased God—" Miss Caroline's voice shook, but her sunken blue eyes gleamed brightly, "that he should atone by a gallant death for many errors of youth——"

"They have all died like that, the de Coursets—it is the family tradition," said Jeanne, with a throb of pride, "but, oh—how frightened that made me for Louis all through the Boer War. And he was never even wounded,—after all!"

"It also pleased God," said Miss Marney, "that the last of the Marneys of Orsett should be—just an old brother and sister living together, and alone; pursued by misfortune, as you must know."

Jeanne had heard of the great fire which had destroyed Orsett Hall, and she nodded sympathetically.

"I know you lost your home," she said softly.

"And my brother," said Miss Marney, "he was not an old man, but he never recovered the shock; he would not face the rebuilding of Orsett, so we came to London. I had always desired to live in London, thus sorrowfully was my wish attained—too late to give me any pleasure. We bought this house from a distant cousin, the Duke of Monaghan, and here we settled with the salvage of our home—and here my brother died."

She wiped away a tear, but it seemed rather an

involuntary tribute to her brother's memory than the outcome of any agitation, for her voice was quite calm.

"Fortunately we had saved most of the family treasures; the pictures, which are very valuable, the library, the plate, and some of the furniture. My love, I hope these things will always be cared for as I have cared for them. I have guarded them as the apple of my eye," said Miss Marney, very earnestly. "During the last twenty years, the care of them has been my only solace. I have had the pictures cleaned and restored by degrees under my own supervision; and a *catalogue raisonné* made of the books. They have supplied the place of friends and acquaintances, being so very full of memories and associations for me. I was too old when I came here, my love, to begin a fresh life—but you are young. You will call upon people later on, and they will be glad to see you."

There was a pause.

"You are wondering," said Miss Marney, shrewdly, "why when your father was killed in Afghanistan, we did not send for you and your twin-brother, twenty years ago?"

"I have been wondering ever since I came here," said Jeanne frankly.

"My brother had the strongest possible feelings against such *mésalliances* as the one your father chose to contract. It was utterly repugnant to

him. His indulgence was already exhausted by your poor father's extravagance and—and other matters into which I cannot enter with you; and he warned Louis that if he married this young woman he would henceforth be a stranger to him and to his children after him. He kept his word, as a Marney naturally would," said Miss Caroline with excessive haughtiness. "He never, in fact, wavered for a moment. He told me he hoped I should never waver. But he extracted no promise." She hesitated. "Your brother is very dear to you, Jeanne?"

"He is everything in the world to me," said Jeanne.

Her brown eyes glistened in the firelight, which now illumined the room somewhat less brightly.

"Then you will understand that his wishes were the more sacred when he was no longer with me."

"Then why——"

"I am coming to that. The actions of human beings," said Miss Marney, solemnly, "are not always guided by principle. More often, perhaps, especially in our family, by impulse, prejudice, or sentiment. Let me get my dear dog safe and snug, or he is such an intelligent animal that he will assuredly bite you. Now you may look in the pocket of my bag—don't fumble anything else—and you will find a little letter in a fancy envelope. It was written to me when your

father was at a preparatory school, the first time he ever left home."

The firelight flickered over the mahogany furniture; on the polished glass top of the dressing-table, laden with crystal and gold; on the medicine bottles by the bedside; and on the little brown head of Jeanne, stooping by the brass fender over the dim writing on the small yellow sheet.

Miss Caroline Marney lay still among the pillows of her four-poster bed; apparently considering the ornamentation of the ceiling, as she caressed mechanically her sleeping lap-dog; twining the gloved taper fingers among its silvery grey curls.

She had come very nearly to the end of her life's journey, and doubtless her thoughts travelled a long way back on the road, bridging space, and lingering among those flowery tracks of youth which seem always so fair to the onlooker, with a beauty which the little pilgrim straying therein seldom recognises until he has left them far behind.

Jeanne read the letter.

"Slough, Windsor, January, 1858.

"My Dere Auntie,

"I am writting as you bid me, but it is very difficult to writ here. I hope soon it will be time for me to leeve here and go to Eton. I am not at all homsick as you feered I would be. I hope it will soon be

the hollydays. I wish I had been a better boy to uncle Philip, and then I need not have come to school yet. There is one boy hear younger than me, so I am not the youngest. I send everybody at Orsett my love, and please please tell Uncle Philip I feel very sorry indeed now to have been so bad. I deresay I shall bring home some prizes. It is not three months to the hollydays. Please feed my guiny pigs. My derest darling Anty, you need not be afrade I will forget you at schole.

"Remember that werever I am I will holways love you even when you are quit old.

"Your aff. and dutiful nephew,

"Louis de Courset."

"I thought I had destroyed all his letters," said Miss Caroline's voice from the bed. "But I found that one the other day, just before my illness, when I was turning out an old desk. If you ask me, Jane, why, after all, I sent for you—that is the only reason I can give you."

"You are not afraid—" Jeanne's voice faltered and she looked rather fearfully round the shadowy corners of the large luxurious room, "you are not afraid that your poor brother would be angry with you?"

"I am so close to him now," said Miss Marney's voice in the darkness, "that I know he is not."

CHAPTER III

THE MINIATURES

THE lonely lady went down-stairs to her own bedroom after this conversation, not a little cheered and comforted by the first real intercourse she had held with a human being since her arrival in Grosvenor Square.

Her bedroom was on the first floor; a strangely solitary apartment, whereof the isolation inspired her with much nightly terror.

A suite of cold white drawing-rooms had been turned into a series of picture galleries, and though the walls were crowded with pictures, these were carefully veiled from view, and the scanty furniture, dotted about the ocean of polished *parquet*, was muffled in holland covers, so that the saloons presented a very comfortless and ghostly appearance.

The empty music-room beyond had no furniture at all save a grand piano, and two shrouded chairs. The great mahogany folding doors of this apartment opened upon the landing of a secondary staircase; and across this landing, in a


cul de sac, was the spare room which had been assigned to Jeanne.

It had not occurred to Miss Marney that her niece might be nervous; she had herself no experience of night fears. She occupied the best bedroom on the second floor, and Dunham slept in the communicating apartment on the right, whilst old Mrs. Pyke inhabited the dressing-room beyond the bathroom on her left. Moreover a hand bell stood by her side, and the knob of an electric bell was nightly placed beneath her pillow, so that she might be able to summon assistance in a moment, should a burglar appear, as Dunham constantly apprehended he would.

Jeanne had a bell in her room, but she had no idea whether any one would hear it if she rang it after the household had retired; and being, besides, unaccustomed to the convenience of bells, the sight of it brought her little comfort.

She suffered great agonies of nightly terrors; thinking of the silent ghostly suite of rooms beyond her own, or listening to the unaccustomed noises of the streets; with the knowledge that no one else was sleeping on the same floor, and that the servants' quarters were carefully shut off by green baize doors at the end of the long passage.

But to-day she felt less lonely, because the sounds overhead no longer spoke to her of mystery and suffering. She could picture her aunt's face on the pillow, with the pink bows tied under her



chin, and Mrs. Dunham moving about, making up the fire, and ministering to her various needs.

Coming freshly from the perusal of that letter, penned half a century ago, by a miserable little home-sick schoolboy, it was natural that Jeanne should go straight to the shabby desk which contained his despised family records; consisting of one worn old blue leather volume, stamped faintly with the fleur-de-lys, and five miniatures.

From this little stock of treasures, she drew first her father's portrait.

It was a very bad little painting, and perhaps her long enforced study of the Romney picture in the morning-room helped to open her eyes to its deficiencies.

She laid it down with a sigh, and lifted the triple frame which contained the three French miniatures, of her great-grandfather and his brother and sister in their *première jeunesse*.

The young Marquis wore a wig of powdered curls depending on either side of a full, sensuous face, with a high nose, thick dark eyebrows, merry brown eyes, and a pronounced dimpled chin. The feature most attractive and individual was the mouth, beautifully shaped, and redder even than the crimson drapery held by a white hand, in most artificial pose, around a loosely open shirt of frilled lawn, and an unbuttoned *surtout*.

Charles, the naval officer, was cast in a sterner

and plainer mould; but Anne-Marie resembled her elder brother. There was no trace of the *religieuse* in this miniature, which represented a young girl, with raven tresses and flowered head-dress, piled above arched brows and hazel eyes, and simpering, cherry, bow-shaped lips. It was strange to look upon the picture, and read the record in the shabby book of her dignified, heroic acceptance of imprisonment; of her lonely death in the *Citadelle* of Calais; the first woman of her order to suffer arrest, and victim most innocent of the Revolution.

The fifth miniature was in a locket, and represented her grandfather, Henri, as he had been when he married Miss Jane Marney of Orsett. Doubtless the medallion was a wedding present and had been worn upon the bride's heart; for a lock of the gallant Colonel's grey hair was enclosed in the crystal back, and on the rim was engraved in minute letters, "Henri Charles Louis, Marquis et Comte de Courset, etc, etc., Col. 29th Hussars."

Jeanne's father's bore only his name. The French title had evidently been discarded by his mother's family. The boy who was destined to become Marney of Orsett could afford to ignore such empty and barren honours. Perhaps the "gentle Jane" had been less scornful, Jeanne thought.

Louis and Jeanne had built many a fairy castle of hope and romance in their childhood, all founded upon this wonderful French ancestry

which Miss Marney regarded so contemptuously.

Louis was burning with ambition, and fertile in imagination, and his bold fancy embraced many a scheme for the restoration of the French monarchy, and his own consequent aggrandisement.

His hopes were for himself, Jeanne's were for him, but her sympathy and ardour were not the less warm on this account; and her dreams continued long after his had been quenched in the realities of an active life.

Their honest, prosaic Welsh uncle had no idea of the secret aspirations of the twins' early youth, nor was his respect for French blood and breeding any higher than Miss Marney's own.

Louis and Jeanne, who were called Lewis and Jane at Coed-Ithel, ascribed his contempt to ignorance, and learnt to smile inwardly when he expressed his views on the subject.

"Poor sister Jenny," said the farmer, alluding to their dead mother with indulgent pity. "So much to do about her grand marriage, and, willy-nilly, she must have him against the wishes of his family, and what did my fine gentleman do for her after all? Lost her a good situation in Bath, and sent her here with his pedigree in her pocket and never a brass farthing to keep it company. A pedigree be good for stock, but it never made human beings any more worth that ever I heard of. Poor Jenny had a hankering

after the gentry, more than ever I could understand; but there it is, she was church and I was chapel, so to speak, and her children shall be what she was, as is but right and natural. Still she came to be glad, pension or no pension, that her boy should be brought up on a good honest farm. I don't grudge him a good education though. He's a gentleman's son, and I can afford to pay for 'un. Take it and welcome, says I."

Louis took the best he could get. The Rector of the parish was friendly with the headmaster of the grammar school in the nearest large market town, and interested him in the history of the twins while Louis was yet a little boy. The child's lively intelligence, precocity, and good looks did the rest. In time Louis won scholarships as well as the approval and affection of his master, and he delighted his uncle by retaining his interest in the farm throughout the triumphs which awaited him in his school and college career.

"You can't make that boy a farmer," said the grammar-school wiseacre.

"I 'll be a farmer some day," said young Louis, "but a soldier first as my father was before me. Uncle Roberts can carry on the farm without my help for many a long year yet. When he wants that, I 'll come."

The lad was bold, and knew his own mind, and when to speak it. He won his uncle over to his own way of thinking, where the schoolmaster

might have advised in vain, and went to an army crammer in due course; old Llewellyn Roberts showing no signs that he grudged the expense of the lad's education. Perhaps he was proud of his nephew's wit and industry, and the ease with which he held his own in sport as in study.

But when Louis had once obtained his commission, his uncle, beyond providing him with his outfit and fifty pounds in ready money, assisted him no further, holding that he was now a made man, who must earn his bread and live by his profession. The boy asked no more favours; sailed for India, with a light heart and the highest hopes, and managed for a couple of years, by hook or by crook, to keep his head above water in spite of a too open-handed disposition. Now and then Jeanne received from him letters of financial despair, over which she wept, for she had not a penny of her own in the world, and was powerless to help him.

But when the South African War broke out, and Louis, who had been coming home with his regiment in the spring, was ordered to the front, he wrote joyfully to Jeanne:

"I wonder how many poor fellows this war has saved from bankruptcy. Me, for one."

Llewellyn Roberts was a sturdy, independent man, and had sought no assistance in the bringing up of his orphan nephew and niece, from their

father's relatives. Nevertheless he was too shrewd a Welshman to refuse the tardy hand of fellowship held out by their wealthy and, presumably, dying great-aunt.

On receipt of Miss Marney's telegram he had desired his neice to pack up immediately and go to London, and to stay as long as she was wanted.

Girls did not enter much into the calculations of Uncle Roberts; he was a man of few words and fewer promises, and though he made no secret of his intention that Louis should inherit Coed-Ithel, he never talked of making any provision for Jeanne.

If her great-aunt left her a legacy however, so much the better for her. Whether she did or no, Jeanne was a pretty girl, and would probably get married some day. Uncle Roberts did not pause to consider that Jeanne had scarcely seen, much less spoken to a marriageable young man in her life. If she did not marry, it would be her brother's obvious duty to keep her.

He did not trouble himself concerning Jeanne, though he liked, in a vague way, to know she was "about the place," a timid, bright-eyed, dimpled little thing, always happy and occupied, it seemed to him, with her own harmless concerns, into which he had no wish to pry. He left her entirely to the care and under the orders of old Granny Morgan, the woman who kept house for him, and

who still looked upon Jeanne as a little girl, though she was five and twenty years old.

Nor did Jeanne receive overmuch consideration at the Rectory, whither she was perpetually invited, or sent for, to play with the solitary daughter of the house, some two years her senior, because Cecilia required a playmate, and Jeanne was gentle, good-tempered, and refined in speech and manner, being quick to observe and to imitate all that appealed to her natural taste, and to discard what did not.

She learnt her first lessons in the village school, which was more than two miles distant from Coed-Ithel, and a long tramp for a little maid in bad weather. Here she got on so fast that her uncle was minded to send her to a genteel boarding-school, being well-to-do; but he was happily deterred from this course by the Rector's wife, who was not, and who saw her way to halve the salary of a governess and obtained a companion for her child at one and the same time.

Louis privately rejoiced over this arrangement, whilst pretending to scorn Jeanne's studies, and her friendship for the spoilt Cecilia.

He found fault with her, teased her, and commanded her, after the fashion of brothers; whilst she worshipped him untiringly, excused his faults, and bore patiently with his moods—though often winking away a tear in secret—after the fashion of sisters.

The twins loved each other so intensely that they were obliged to hide their feelings, each from each, for fear the other should discover the truth.

Jeanne, of course, concealed her affection less carefully than Louis,—wept openly when he went to school, and even seized the opportunity to be personally demonstrative whenever he was, from any cause, too dejected to resent being kissed, or to be annoyed with her for thus dragging to the surface feelings which should have been too deep for outward expression.

She reproached him sometimes, for unkindness, when he declined her offered caresses; but secretly she thought him a very manly boy.

Though Louis indulged far less in romantic day dreams than did his solitary sister, yet he treasured the few records of his family's past greatness no less jealously than she. Though his prejudices as a British schoolboy warred with his sympathy for France, yet he had the history of that country at his fingers' ends, and kept steadily in view his determination to perfect himself in the language of his fathers.

As he grew older, his perception widened with his reading, and he found it possible to combine loyalty for the land of his adoption with reverence for the misfortunes of his own race.

At Sandhurst it was the fashion among his comrades to encourage young de Courset to hold forth upon the tragedy which must ensue in

case war broke out between England and France.

His intentions hovered between a dramatic resignation of his sword, and immediate suicide; and the cadets warmly advocated the latter course, and supplied him with innumerable receipts for a painless end. Their derision was of a friendly kind, however, for Louis was popular, amusing, and sincere. It is affectation which usually excites the ridicule that kills; and is the unforgivable sin most utterly detested by honest youth.

From the time of his first school-going Louis lived but little at the farm; and as he was not infrequently invited to pass a portion of his holidays with one schoolfellow or another, he had many friends of whom his sister knew next to nothing, and lived a life altogether separated from hers. But she enjoyed all his confidence, exulted in his successes, and sympathised passionately with his troubles.

Perhaps she was less impressed with his wisdom than Louis always liked; for her rustic shyness, and ignorance born of utter inexperience, made him appear and feel much older than his twin sister. She thought him careless and extravagant, as indeed he was, and sent him little sermons concerning these tendencies.

Sometimes her advice was more humorous than practical.

"I am so sorry you do not like your C. O. He

must be *horrid*. But do try hard, my dearest boy, to please him. For instance you are so quick and clever, could you not get up early, and do all his work for him sometimes? I feel sure this would be the way to get on; and when they saw how much better you did it than he could, surely they would promote you. And please do send me your socks to mend, I am sure it would pay for the postage to get them properly done."

But if Louis laughed over these and other effusions from the anxious little sister, his laughter was always tender.

Her only *confidante* and the humble sharer of her hopes and her fears for her brother was Granny Morgan, and these letters were often the upshot of their consultations.

"It is so difficult to know how to say enough, and not too much," she would explain to the old woman. "But it frightens me to hear of these subscriptions and things when he has no money."

"A word here and a word there, my deary, like water dropping on a stone," said Granny Morgan; "he'll take to counting his clothes when they comes home from the wash as he grows older, but the best of men is careless about such things. Just mix up a warning-like in all the news you send him, like a powder in jam, and some of it will come home to him when he least expects it."

Jeanne herself hardly knew the meaning of extravagance or self-indulgence.

She grew up hard-working and simple; red-cheeked and bright-eyed; an adept in bee-keeping and fruit-preserving and butter-making; though, being the farmer's niece, she naturally left the milking of the cows to the herdsman; nor would old Mrs. Morgan permit her to put her hand to any of the rougher work of the house, but prided herself on bringing up Jeanne "like a lady" to sew her seam, and look after the dairy.

Nevertheless, Jeanne had her troubles; for though the Rector and his wife were kind and homely, she was of little account in their eyes compared with their own over-indulged daughter.

Cecilia, in consequence, gave herself airs, and being older and bolder than her humble playmate constantly asserted and maintained her superiority, until she electrified her little world by marrying, at eighteen, a celebrated scientist and archæologist, who had come to this out-of-the-way corner of Wales in order to examine the ruins for which it was famous.

The professor's spectacled middle-aged eyes lit upon the Rector's daughter, and her apple-cheeked, fair-haired buxom comeliness inclined him to wed Cecilia.

Her parents never dreamt of her accepting his proposal, but she did so; and it turned out that

he was rich, and she became very superior and prosperous on the spot.

Thus she passed out of Jeanne's life, and very nearly out of her parents' lives also, who had existed since her birth only for her; and who were equally pained and bewildered by this unforeseen result of her promotion.

Jeanne, though she had not at the time much regretted the departure of Cecilia, had certainly missed her, since a fitful semblance of friendship had been kept up between them to the last. For a few months after the wedding, a desultory correspondence was maintained; then Mrs. Hogg-Watson became too busy or too magnificent to write any more to her humble friend at Coed-Ithel farm.

"I think the child is honest, Dunham."

"I am sure of it, ma'am."

"Her eyes remind me of Clumber—you remember Clumber?"

"Yes 'm," said Dunham, with an inflection of disapproval, "but I would be sorry to compare a Christian to a dog 'm."

"Nevertheless she has the same brown, faithful eyes as my dear old spaniel."

Dunham permitted herself a slight sniff.

"And though she appears self-engrossed, as all young people do, she is not really thinking of herself at all, but of her brother. She is on the

watch, as Clumber used to be for me; jealously guarding him all the while, though he is so far away. My heart went out to her, Dunham, for she is my own kith and kin after all. She is so gentle and so faithful. Not at all the vulgar young woman I had dreaded."

"She's too simple to be vulgar, ma'am," said Dunham, shrewdly.

"She is very rustic and timid, of course."

"So she is, 'm. Almost afraid to eat and drink, Hewitt says."

"I desire you will not repeat the servants' gossip about my grand-niece, Dunham. I am very glad to hear she has not a gross appetite. It would be lamentable in so young a person. What else does he say of her?"

"I think, ma'am, you'll tire yourself with talking so much," said Dunham, stiffly.

"You are taking advantage to bully me, Dunham, because you think me too ill to resent it," said the invalid, querulously.

"Me take advantage—God forgive you for saying so, Miss Caroline. But you don't mean it, and it's time for your mixture."

A tear shone in the old blue eyes.

"Perhaps I am a little tired," said Miss Marney, "though I waited several days before sending for her. I would n't let her come till I felt quite myself again." Then, after a pause, "They seem to have taken a great care of their French

family rubbish, such as it is, all these years, Dunham. They must be worthy of trust."

"I'm one as judges by small things, ma'am, and I'm sure of it. She's not so much as thrown a burnt match about since she's been here. Never a chair moved out of its place in the morning-room, but it's put back. And the new ormolu fender has n't another mark on it since that day the curate called and balanced hisself on the edge of it, all the time he was asking you for a subscription."

"Yes. I looked up the bill for the fender, and deducted the amount from the sum I had intended to give," said Miss Marney grimly. "I am glad she is careful of the furniture. It confirms my good opinion. Dunham—I am half thinking of sending for Mr. Valentine to-morrow."

"I've no opinion of half-thoughts, ma'am. They generally come to nothing."

"You will write him a line to-night," said Miss Caroline.

Jeanne sat over the fire, with the miniatures in her lap, when Dunham came tapping at the door.

"A letter for you, missy, from South Africa. I though I would bring it myself, and hear how the young gentleman was."

"How very kind of you!" Jeanne's eyes opened

in grateful astonishment at this sudden *accès* of attentiveness.

"I've seen his photograph, missy," said Dunham, in subdued tones, betraying, however, that note of personal interest, which had hitherto been entirely lacking in her brief converse with Jeanne.

"Did Aunt Marney—I mean Aunt Caroline—show it to you?"

"Yes, missy, she did."

"You have lived with her a long, long time, Mrs. Dunham, have n't you?"

"Yes, missy. You'll be wanting to look at your letter."

Jeanne opened it reluctantly.

She preferred reading those sacred epistles from her far-away soldier in solitude. A page at a time, to eke out her delight.

But the first glance at the closely written sheets caused her to utter an incredulous sound of delight and surprise.

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham! His passage is booked. He is coming home! He will sail by the *Briton* early in January, or at least he *hopes* he will."

She forgot her desire for solitude, in the joy of sharing the good news.

"I'm very glad, missy."

Dunham's voice was troubled.

"I don't know if I ought to take it on myself—

but—if you could send him a cable, and ask him to start earlier—”

“Earlier! But I never expected him to come at all.”

Dunham hesitated. Her small dim eyes peered anxiously out of her wrinkled face.

“Your auntie would like to see him.”

“But she will see him.”

Dunham shook her head sorrowfully.

“I am sure you are over anxious, Mrs. Dunham,” said Jeanne, who now beheld all the world through rose-coloured spectacles. “Indeed, indeed, she does not seem to me so very ill.”

Dunham evaded the subject.

“It might make a great difference, missy, to the young gentleman,” she urged beneath her breath.

“A great difference!” said Jeanne. But though she was simple she was not stupid. A light broke in upon her.

“Oh—you could not—you could not suppose he would—hurry home—for *that!*” she cried in horror.

It is sometimes difficult for the old to fathom the disinterestedness—the lofty sentiment—of the very young; but Dunham did not make the mistake of doubting Jeanne’s sincerity.

“He is so like the old Colonel, Miss Jane,” she said, earnestly, “that your auntie can think of nothing else. When she was n’t talking to me,

she's lain there, looking at the photograph, like one in a dream. She was terrible wrapt up in her papa, missy, and that picture in the morning-room is the apple of her eye. It was a thousand pities the young gentleman did n't walk in to see her before he started for the war."

"But, Mrs. Dunham, we did not even know where she lived. It is more than five and twenty years ago that my father broke with his mother's people. They were never in our lives at all."

"I know, missy, and more's the pity, for the young gentleman is a Marney, every inch of him, as his auntie keeps saying."

"He is a de Courset," said Jeanne, and her cheeks burnt.

"Not in looks, Miss Jane, as you could not deny, if you remembered your own father as I do," said the maid with asperity.

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham, do you indeed? Please tell me about him," cried Jeanne, and she dropped her dignified manner in haste. "Uncle Roberts never speaks of him, he tells us nothing."

"We are told to speak no ill of the dead, Miss Jane," said Dunham. "If your poor papa did n't turn out as steady a young gentleman as his best friends would have wished, why he died for his country, missy, as no man can do more—and in the grave, as they say, all is forgotten. I can't stop, for your auntie does n't like me out of her sight. But if you could only think over—

without a word to your auntie—about cabling to Mr. Louis—” the name came naturally to her lips—“ you need n’t to give him any reason, but just to say as it was best for him to come.”

“ Oh, Mrs. Dunham, Louis and I have no secrets from each other. Of course if I cabled for him, I must tell him why. And though he loves me more than any one else in the whole world,” said Jeanne, and her tone was jealously exultant, “ and would do what I asked him if he possibly could—yet his work comes first. A soldier must think of his duty, you know; and his whole career, besides, depends on it. I am perfectly certain he could not get away earlier. All his letters are full of his longing to get home. Just think that he has not seen England for five years—nor me—his only sister and his twin! And you can imagine that if he could get away a single day sooner, he would be only too glad to do it.”

“ Poor young gentleman, he must have had a hard time, but he ’s got on well, by all accounts and been steady, missy, I hope,” said Dunham lingering.

“ Steady! Why he has done brilliantly!” cried Jeanne, with soft indignation. She seized the chance of holding forth upon her brother’s perfections the more eagerly, because she had had no listener for three weeks; and also because, like many young people, she was at this period of her life almost exclusively interested in her own

concerns. "Just think of him, Mrs. Dunham,—a poor young lieutenant in a line regiment, with nothing but his pay; and now he is a captain at five and twenty and has the D. S. O. He was n't even very glad at his promotion—for so many of his regiment were killed, poor fellows; and he always thought—that was so like Louis,—that they were better men than he. He said the best always got shot—it was like a fatality. But Louis came through it all without a scratch. And he was mentioned in despatches twice, Mrs. Dunham, he was indeed. Uncle Roberts pretended not to care, but he cried—he actually cried—when the Rector came up with the paper. And his Colonel wrote about him to Uncle Llewellyn—though Louis could n't bear him when first he joined, but on active service he said it was all different. And when the war was over, he got this job at Durban about the prisoners of war—partly because he learnt Dutch so quickly that he spoke it quite well, and of course it gave him extra pay; but it was all, all through his own cleverness, for he has no interest, Mrs. Dunham, none whatever."

"He's got it in his face, missy," said Dunham, in the same subdued tones. "But still I'm sorry very sorry I am, that he could n't be here for your auntie's last Christmas."

"Does the doctor say that?" said Jeanne, startled.

"Oh, missy, I go by my own senses, that's

known her fifty years—far better than any doctors," said Dunham. "A professional gentleman knows better than to make prophecies and risk being wrong after all. His patients want to be told what they must do to get well again. It's not his business nor yet his interests to tell them that they won't never get well—to bid them give over hoping—"

"Does Aunt Caroline know?"

"Yes, missy," said Dunham, solemnly, "she knows as well as I do."

CHAPTER IV

THE FUNERAL

JEANNE sat in the London church as one in a dream.

Through the fog which pervaded the building, the lights twinkled mistily, and a far-away voice pronounced the words of the burial service so slowly, that her tired and bewildered brain could not follow the sentences consecutively.

Her attention fixed itself upon the coffin, heaped with flowers, its shape dimly visible among the surrounding bearers; and her mind was filled with a vague wild pity for the unconscious occupant, upon whose waxen face she had gazed for the last time on the previous day.

The old servants, a small pathetic black-clad group, with bent shoulders and whitened heads, were together in a pew on the left, and the rest of the household a little lower down the church.

But Jeanne, on the right, knelt in her pew alone, and of other mourners, save the lawyer and the doctor, there were none. How strange that a woman so wealthy should have so few friends, thought little Jeanne.

The tears fell fast upon her new black crape.

"Just as I was beginning to love her," she thought, "and now she will never see Louis after all."

That a thing so much desired should not come to pass seemed incredibly sad and astonishing to her.

If Jeanne had heard at Coed-Ithel of Miss Marney's death in London at eighty years old, and after a succession of paralytic seizures, it would have presented itself to her mind as a most likely and natural event. But as it had actually occurred, it seemed to her for the moment almost as though the end of the world had come; she could hardly even realise it to be true.

During the long days that had elapsed between her aunt's death and the funeral, she had gone over and over the past weeks incessantly in her own mind, and lived through the final tragedy a hundred times, always possessed by a horror and pity in proportion to her utter inexperience.

She lay awake in her isolated chamber with beating heart, hearing again and again the flying footsteps in the echoing corridors; the hurried summons at the door; the silver chiming of the clock in the silent chamber of death; the sound of the deep, deep breathing that would presently cease for ever.

But when she recalled her third and last interview with Miss Caroline, she could not but own

to herself that her aunt had spoken then much as she might have spoken had she expected to live for another hundred years.

The habits of a life-time do not change in a moment, even though that moment be the last.

The little growling dog was caressed; the gloved hand still guarded the velvet bag as jealously as though Miss Caroline meant to take it with her on her long journey. She was still anxious to impress upon Jeanne the importance of the Marneys of Orsett, and the comparative insignificance of the de Coursets; she referred to the advantages of exclusiveness; and emphasised the necessity for taking care of the furniture and the pictures.

Was it possible she could be so near Eternity and her mind yet fixed so firmly on things which would presently for her, have no existence at all?

No more sincere and pitiful mourner than little Jeanne could have knelt by that deathbed of her old relation, and yet the emotion which possessed her was but the shadow of sorrow, and not sorrow itself, though it held much of regret.

Very strongly she felt that she might have loved Miss Caroline had she known her a little better. An instinctive sympathy had immediately manifested itself between her and her aunt.

But it had come too late. Miss Marney had passed the last years of her long life in solitude,

whilst Jeanne,—not much less lonely than her aunt, since she had lost the companionship of Louis—would so gladly have borne her company, and given her the affection of a dutiful and gentle child.

Dunham, jealously watching her poor lady's great-niece, though convinced of her sincerity, was touched by the anxiety Jeanne manifested to learn what her aunt's wishes had been, that she might be certain of acting in accordance with them throughout those dismal days.

"The directions for her funeral was all written long ago, ma'am," said Dunham, whose respect for Jeanne increased now that she beheld in her the sole representative present of the family she had served so long. "She is to be laid by the side of poor Mr. Philip, ma'am, in the family vault. No 'm, she would not have liked you to travel down with it. She had very fixed ideas about what ladies were able to do. Mr. Valentine and the doctor will go. And there 'll be some of the old people left down there. They 'll be present, ma'am, you may depend. You will go to the church Miss Jane; and she was particular as it should be the one she last attended. She was always chopping and changing, poor dear, according as the services went up or down—or did n't suit her fancy one way and another. You 'll go to the church with the rest of us, and then there 's nothing more to be done, ma'am, but

to wait till Mr. Valentine, the lawyer, comes and tells you what 's been settled."

So the sad procession wended its way from the church to the station, and the men went with it; but Jeanne, with Dunham and Mrs. Pyke, in attendance, returned to the desolate house in Grosvenor Square, where she strove to fill the remaining hours of the day by writing a long letter to her brother.

"Oh, Louis, it is so dreadful. The great house was silent enough before, but now that she is really gone, it seems a thousand times more empty still. Reason as one may, how cruel it feels to take her out of her beautiful luxurious room, away from all the comforts that have always surrounded her poor body; away from all the familiar things she has treasured so long—and just lay her in a cold stone vault.

"I know it has to come to everybody, but it is freshly awful when it comes home to oneself like this; but you have seen death so often and so close, poor boy, that you will hardly understand my feeling. I say to myself—but what is one old old woman, whose life was finished, to all the young lives that have been cut short in the South African War. And yet, perhaps because I am alone, and you so far away—perhaps because this house and every one in it is still so strange to me—I cannot get over the horror of it, nor the remembrance of it—and am so cowardly and afraid at night—

"I try to remember all she said that last morning when I saw her by daylight for the first time, and realised that she was really very ill.

"I am glad to recollect she said she was pleased I had come, and that she wished it had been earlier; but I can't say she was at all like what I expected a dying person to be, even then.

"She said Providence played odd tricks, in rather a complaining way, not at all as though it were in any way her own doing, poor dear, not to have sent for me earlier.

"She spoke of you and asked about your career and praised you for having done so well though brought up in an out-of-the-way farm, with nothing to inspire you but your own ambition; and said how it proved that blood will always tell (but she meant the blood of the Marneys and not of the de Coursets all the time). She hoped you were very particular what company you kept, she said, and it was bad company which led thoughtless young men astray, and oh, I am afraid she was thinking of poor papa; but you would never never be led astray would you, Louis, or fall into the evil ways she spoke of? I told her again and again that you had never done anything in your life that you ought not to do—and that at the worst you were only a little—a very little extravagant in giving presents and things you could not afford. I think I comforted her, and she said extravagance did n't matter, but oh Louis, that is only because she

is so rich, she does n't know what poverty means; so don't let it lead you away,—to hear she thinks so little of it.

"About me, she said she was glad to see I was so very exclusive; which is I think her polite way of noticing that I have no friends at all. And she liked to think of me in the morning-room, because Dunham told her how very careful I was of the furniture (I should hope so, you have no idea how beautiful it is). Again and again she begged me to take care of her things (as though I were going to live here all my life) as it was a mistake to trust the best of servants; and that she liked to know I had a brother so devoted to me as her's had always been to her, and that history repeated itself.

"Well, then, Dunham came in and said Mr. Valentine had called, and Aunt Caroline said he was to come up at once to her room. I thought she seemed a little depressed, so I foolishly said how glad I was she had a visitor, and I hoped it would cheer her a little; she quite drew her head up on the pillow, and said solicitors were not visitors, and that he had come on business. 'Professional callers, even though they be gentlemen, my dear Jane, do not count. But of course you could not know that, my love.'

"I went away directly he came in, but I thought he looked a kind old man. Mrs. Dunham says he and his father and grandfather have been the

Marney's solicitors for three generations, and have always known all their affairs.

"When I think over that last interview, all we said seems rather meaningless and trivial. If I had known she was going I would have liked just to thank her for sending for me; and to tell her I was very proud to belong to her, for she was an ideal old lady to look at, and you would have been proud of her too. Besides I might have told her that we would both remember her loyally always, and other things which would have pleased and comforted her and yet been quite quite true.

"But, no, instead of all this I sat still and was more anxious to talk about you than to listen to the last words she was ever going to say to me in this world.

"During those long hours when we were all waiting through the night; waiting—oh how dreadful—through the night—for her to die—she spoke only twice, almost as though in her sleep. Once she said 'The horse-chestnuts are coming out in the avenue.' I felt that her spirit was a long way off in the past, back at Orsett, in the country, the spring-time and the sunshine.

"The next time it would have been funny if it had not been so terribly pathetic, for she said half crying, 'Mary Ann is very cross. She won't let me go to the fair,' so then she must have been a little girl again. I hope she died like that, and did not go away in the dark thinking of herself as an old

woman with nobody but Mrs. Dunham and Mrs. Pyke left behind to be sorry for her.

"Your photo was under her pillow, so I have got it back again at last. I wish I had n't grudged it to her so much.

It was all like a dream afterwards. I shook hands with one or two people, but I scarcely know who they were. One was the doctor but neither he nor the parson seemed to know her at all well. Mrs. Dunham said she did n't believe in doctors, and changed her church very often. The poor curate evidently did not know exactly what to say, but I suppose he thought he ought to try and comfort me, so he said 'God be wi' ye,' instead of good-bye, in a hollow voice; and squeezed my hand so viciously that my ring cut into my finger. I was horrified with myself for feeling more inclined to laugh than to cry, when I am sure he meant so kindly; but when he asked if I was staying on I explained I should be going back to Coed-Ithel in a few days, so I don't think he'll come again. I wrote to Uncle Roberts and told him, when it was all over, and he sent a post-card to say it was the decree of Providence and what we must all come to. But he evidently had no idea of coming up for the funeral as the doctor thought he might, and as I was sure he would n't. . .

"I am writing this in the morning-room; and I will finish it to-morrow when I have seen Mr. Valentine."

CHAPTER V

THE WILL

A GLEAM of wintry sunshine stole in through the lace-shrouded windows, and turned the green damask walls of the morning-room to gold; and brightened the flowered chintz on the couch, and shone through the ragged petals of the giant lemon-tinted and copper-hued chrysanthemums, and upon the fresh dark violets, in their silver bowl.

Before an old French bureau, Mr. Valentine sat, with crossed knees, and folded hands, explaining the late Miss Marney's wishes to her grand-niece.

He was not at all like Jeanne's preconceived notion of a family solicitor; being neither dried up nor severe, but on the contrary, a very pleasant, cheerful, grey-headed old gentleman; with an expression which, subdued it as he would, was jovial in the extreme.

"This will was executed somewhat hurriedly," he said, "but it is, of course, quite in order; and I am heartily glad, if you will allow me to say so, to have been enabled, even at the last moment,

to assist poor Miss Marney to do justice to her only surviving relatives. I am afraid the charities would be somewhat annoyed with me if they knew what they had lost. Happily, they never will, since she destroyed her former testament." Here he showed a faint inclination to chuckle, but was restored instantly to professional gravity by the alarm on Jeanne's expressive face.

"You don't mean it is depriving any one——"

"Certainly not. Good heavens, no, my dear young lady," said the lawyer, wishing he had been less frank. "Pray dismiss any such idea from your mind. Your brother is actually poor Miss Marney's next of kin: he has every possible natural and legal right to inherit her money. If there is anything to be said in the matter, it is on your own account. You have an equal claim upon your great-aunt, with your brother, and she has ignored you altogether."

"Mr. Valentine," said Jeanne, very earnestly, "I promise you faithfully that I would much rather it all belonged to Louis. What is his is mine, and what is mine is his. It is really exactly the same thing. If you knew him——" her pause was more eloquent than the most fervent praise—"you would understand."

"I hope I may know him very soon indeed," said Mr. Valentine. The twinkling eyes beneath grey brows bent a kind gaze upon Jeanne, and she looked up at him with sincere veneration.

"Your brother is of age, I believe?"

"He is twenty-five,—and he is a captain already," said Jeanne, trembling with anxiety to recapitulate her brother's extraordinary achievements. "He has been very lucky. He saw some service on the Indian Frontier, and he has been through the South African War without a scratch. Twice he was mentioned in despatches; and they have given him a job at Durban, which he says will be a most good thing for his career, simply because he learnt Dutch so well; or on his own merits, for he has no interest, Mr. Valentine, none whatever. Unless perhaps they remembered that his father and his grandfather were both killed in action, one at Sevastopol, and one in Afghanistan."

"Most creditable, I 'm sure," said Mr. Valentine, encouragingly, as she paused for breath.

"But I have n't seen him for five years, though I am his twin-sister," she said, rather mournfully.

"Do you mean to say *you* are five and twenty?"

"I am always taken for younger. It is annoying," she said, abashed by his genuine astonishment.

Mr. Valentine looked at the round, childish, wistful face, with its bright eyes, and red bloom of health, and smiled. He would have laughed, but for the solemnity of the occasion.

"Most people would be anything but annoyed.

I am afraid you would not be particularly surprised if I told you I was sixty-five."

"No, I should not," said honest Jeanne, very simply.

"And yet I am only fifty-eight," said Mr. Valentine, rather ruefully. "But, however, to return to business—I must apologise for all my elaborate explanations, but you see I had fancied myself talking to a young lady just out of the schoolroom."

"The explanation made everything clear," said Jeanne, "and I do not suppose I know much more of these things than a young lady just out of the schoolroom would; for I have no experience at all, as Louis says, I have just lived all my life in the same place,—a very lonely place, in the country, with my uncle, who is a farmer."

"Then may I be permitted to ask what you will do now?"

"If this house belongs to Louis—but indeed it seems hardly to be believed——"

"It is undoubtedly your brother's house."

"Then I must stay here till he comes home, and take care of it for him," said Jeanne, decidedly. "Aunt Caroline said it was very wrong to leave even the best of servants to look after valuable pictures and furniture alone."

"I am quite sure you are right. But I fear you will have a lonely Christmas unless—but no

doubt you will persuade some friend to come and be with you."

She shook her head.

"No, there is nobody. But I shall be thinking of Louis, you know, and his coming home so soon." She put her hand to her brow, which ached from the emotion of the previous day, and added with a bewildered look:

"I hope it is not—not heartless—but—but does n't it all mean that Louis will be very rich."

"He will be a very rich man indeed," said Mr. Valentine, gently.

Jeanne sat for a moment in silence; her heart throbbed.

She thought of Louis struggling to live on his pay; of the little presents he had sent her home which he could so ill afford, and which made her cry and laugh over his loving and foolish extravagance; of the letters she had written to beseech him to be just before he was generous, which was exactly what Louis could never be, and had never been; of the many, many things he had wanted, and which she had implored him to do without, and wept because she could not send them and because Uncle Roberts, for all his substantial goodness, was not a man to be asked for money.

The tears dropped once more from her brown eyes, and she just breathed the words, "I wish

I could have thanked Aunt Caroline," as she wiped them away.

"You are quite, quite sure that it is all right, and that there can be no mistake? It would be so cruel to raise his hopes, and then find, after all, there was nothing. Would it not be safer to make quite certain before we say anything about it to him?"

"It is all quite right, and safe as the Bank of England," said Mr. Valentine, soothingly. "Everything Miss Marney has in the world is left unconditionally to your brother. He and I are joint executors, and we are directed to divide a certain sum among the old servants. That is literally all."

"The picture—the Romney—this room—actually belongs to Louis. I beg your pardon, Mr. Valentine, but the more I think of it, the less I can believe it."

"You will get used to the idea," said Mr. Valentine. "Now if you will give me your brother's address, we will write to him at once."

Jeanne dictated the address, and watched him write it down.

"Pray understand," he said, as he did so, "that I am at your service in every possible way, until your brother comes home. I hope you will refer any matter of business connected with this sad event—directly to myself."

"I shall be very thankful, for I know nothing

of business," said Jeanne, timidly. "I suppose everything can go on here as usual? I am sure Aunt Caroline would not have liked any changes and Louis would want to respect her wishes, I know."

"Your brother is coming home so soon that I should certainly advise no changes until his return," said Mr. Valentine. "If any difficulty arises in the matter of immediate expenses—we shall be only too happy to——"

"Oh, there can be none," said Jeanne, and her eyes filled with tears, "for poor Aunt Caroline kept a large sum of ready money in her velvet bag, always by her side. Mrs. Dunham was so upset trying to get it away from the little dog. He would not let it go, but she said Aunt Caroline had desired her to give it to me, and she counted the notes for me, and wrote down the numbers. She said an account must be kept of them. There were six twenty-five pound notes, and Aunt Caroline gave me two the other day."

"It will certainly not be necessary to keep an account of your aunt's presents to yourself," said Mr. Valentine, courteously, "and I am afraid you would not find that a hundred and fifty pounds would go very far towards maintaining this great house. The expenses will of course be defrayed from the estate. You must not think of infringing on your aunt's small gift. I am sure your brother would not wish it; the more

especially since he certainly owes his inheritance indirectly to you, for poor Miss Marney made no secret of the fact that her acquaintance with you inspired her to make this very satisfactory change in the disposition of her property. Now we are agreed that everything should continue as usual here until Captain de Courset's return, or until we receive instructions from him to the contrary. We will ask him to cable his wishes on receipt of our communication."

"I know very well what his wishes will be," said Jeanne. Happiness dawned once more in her shy brown eyes at the thought of her brother's return; and his return to such amazing and unexpected prosperity.

"I cannot realise what it will be like to see him again after all these years. First India—then this long, long South African time. And now in a few weeks he will be with me again. I am expecting a telegram directly he knows for certain which ship he will sail by. Oh, I wonder, I wonder—if he will have changed very much."

Mr. Valentine was very kind and sympathetic, and had every desire to please his new client—or his new client's sister; but he was a busy man, and the Christmas holidays were fast approaching; wherefore he did not invite Jeanne to return to the discussion of her brother's personality or his adventures, but after a repetition of the subdued

congratulations proper to the occasion, shook hands with her, and bowed himself out.

Jeanne, left alone, looked round the warm, luxurious room: at the little table, covered with trifles become pathetic through the death of their owner; the silver-handled loop that the dead woman had used for reading the newspapers; the gold-topped flask of scent, the cut glass bottle of salts; the turquoise-studded *bonbonnière* and tortoise-shell paper-knife; all of which had been restored to their original places by the careful Dunham, when they were no longer needed in the sick-room. An immense fire glowed on the hearth; the air was pervaded by the sweet breath of the scented violets.

The young life in her heart beat more strongly for the rebound from its mournful contact with death. She had not seen the sunshine for so long.

Suddenly Jeanne fell on her knees beside the violets, and cried out, almost involuntarily, "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you"; to relieve her overcharged heart, and without any very clear idea as to whether she were addressing the Almighty or poor Miss Caroline.

Was Louis to be delivered from his stress of poverty, and gain his heart's desire—the means which would enable him to rise to any position he chose—given his industry and talents, and all his personal advantages to supplement his wealth? To restore, perhaps, the ancient dignity

of his family, and fulfil their childish dreams? And all this through the unconscious agency of his humble, ignorant, devoted sister. This was the mouse aiding the lion indeed. Her heart swelled at the proud thought.

"But it wasn't really me," thought little Jeanne, "whatever the lawyer may suppose. It was the photograph—it was his dear face which made her feel she *must* do Louis justice, far more than any words of mine. It was the likeness to you, Colonel Harry," and she looked up at the handsome disdainful face of Harry Marney, whose boyhood, perpetuated by a master hand, was as fresh to-day, as it had been a hundred years since.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you," murmured Jeanne, and she dropped her face into her hands for a moment, in a silent passion of gratitude,—before rising from her knees.

How bright the room looked! Poor Aunt Caroline! And heartless cheerful lady's bower which the dead brain had planned, and the dead hand created, and filled, however incongruously, with beautiful and pleasant things.

Those long weeks of absolute solitude had brought the lonely lady into an almost unnatural relation with inanimate things.

The furniture, the pictures, and the flowers, seemed not to be soulless, but eloquent witnesses of past sadness; and now, with herself, eagerly expectant of joy to come.

She went round, softly touching one thing and another. The strangeness of the house had vanished, and only its beauty remained. It was Louis's house.

She might ask for the keys of the locked Chippendale book-cases when she would. They were Louis's books.

The treasures she had feared to touch—were they not almost her own, since they belonged to Louis?

It was no longer even so much Miss Caroline's father who looked sternly forth from his golden frame above the glowing hearth; but Louis's great-grandfather watching over his descendant's lawful inheritance.

In three weeks,—three little weeks—Louis would come to his own!

His bedroom must be chosen. How the plenishing of it would help to pass the time.

Already one half of Miss Marney's original gift of bank-notes to her niece had travelled to South Africa. It would be a great sum to Louis: almost as great and wonderful a windfall as it had been to Jeanne, the prudent little sister who had after anxious reflection decided to send only the one note to her brother, and to say nothing of the other, but reserve it for emergencies.

Now no such emergencies need be feared. The five and twenty pounds could be spent upon the preparations she would make for her hero's return.

She wondered whether Mrs. Dunham would think it heartless if she rang the bell, and asked for her advice in choosing her brother's room now. She thought not, for Dunham had already, and with a ring of sad exultation in her grief-subdued voice, referred to the home-coming of the young gentleman.

Miss Caroline had had few secrets from her faithful waiting-woman, and the contents of the will, which had surprised Jeanne so much, had been perfectly well known to Dunham, though she had discreetly held her peace upon the subject.

As Jeanne hesitated, with her hand on the bell, Hewitt entered with a telegram upon a salver.

He presented it to his young lady with the air of increased respect which all the household had exhibited, since the death of their late mistress.

Jeanne took it eagerly. Her heart was so full that she was inclined to be communicative even with the monumental butler.

The receipt of a telegram, besides, was not an every-day occurrence with her, but a rare and exciting event.

"Oh, thank you, Hewitt. I expect it is—from my brother," she said, breathlessly opening it—"to tell me the ship by which he is to come home——"

Her voice died away as she read the telegram, once uncomprehendingly, and the second time with a full realisation of its purport.

The brightness faded from her eyes, and the red colour from her cheeks; for these were the words of the message Louis had sent,

"Ordered Somaliland, embark Durban seventh January."

CHAPTER VI

THE NURSERIES

"—if glory leads the way
You 'll be madly rushing on
Never thinking if they kill you
That my happiness is gone!"

"God has been very good to me," wrote Louis from Durban, in the first letter Jeanne received from him, concerning the Somaliland campaign. "Why should this good luck come to me, when every fellow out here would give anything to go? . . . We ought to reach Obbia in about ten days. . . The general impression here seems to be that it will be only a preliminary campaign to make ready for larger operations next cold weather. It won't delay my return home for very long, so make the best of it, my darling little Jeannie. My best chum is so disgusted with what he calls my everlasting luck, that he won't speak to me. It's all the harder for him, poor old fellow, because he applied and I did n't, not dreaming I should have the ghost of a chance. . . . I walked into a photographer's, and had my old phiz. done to please you"—(That is so like

Louis, to try to make it up to me some other way," thought Jeanne)—*"and there is another thing I hate writing about, but I must, and you would rather I did, so here goes.*

"In case anything happens to me, write at once to my bankers; they have my will and life assurance policy. I forget if I told you I managed to insure my life when I first joined. It is for £1000, which will easily clear my debts, buy a good horse for Uncle Roberts, and leave something over for you. Also they have a letter for you, which I wrote a long time ago, but I hope that you may never have to apply for the same, my Jeannie dear, but that I shall soon be home to throw it into the fire and laugh over it, and tell you the contents by word of mouth. . . . The only thing I feel guilty towards you is in starting for Somaliland when I was due and had promised to come home. These are the occasions when you wish I was not a soldier" ("No, never," said Jeanne) *"but they are the only occasions on which a soldier has a chance of showing what he is worth, if indeed he is worth anything, and anyway I shall be two thousand miles nearer to you. . . ."*

Jeanne received this letter in the middle of January, and she perceived by the date that it was written some time before the news of his inheritance had reached Louis.

It roused her from her depression, and awoke

renewed pride in her brother's success where others had failed.

"You see, they always pick him out. It just shows what they must think of him," she said to Dunham, with melancholy exultation.

"It does indeed, ma'am, but if I was him, I must say I should have stood firm and refused to go. With all this business waiting to be settled, and Mr. Valentine able to do next to nothing till he comes home."

"He did not know all that when he wrote. Besides, it would be dishonour to refuse to go on active service," said Jeanne, with reddening cheeks. "How can you think it possible, Mrs. Dunham?"

"Well ma'am, a gentleman with *his* fortune has something better to do than go prancing over the desert looking for naked savages—in my opinion," said Dunham, firmly. "Let others go as has their bread to earn and don't care how they does it. But for a gentleman who will have thousands a year to spend as he likes, I calls it tempting Providence."

"I am afraid it is," said simple Jeanne. "But you don't understand. Louis is a soldier; it is in his blood. He *must* go, while there is any fighting left to be done. It would break his heart to stay behind; though I am sure it breaks mine that he should run more risks. But he is always lucky. Somehow it gives me confidence

to remember how he went through all those dreadful battles in South Africa and never was touched. And he says this will be only a short expedition."

"People used to say that about South Africa, ma'am. Well I remember Hewitt telling us it would all be over in three months," said Dunham gloomily. "But he was wrong, as he nearly always is though never owning it."

"Still perhaps—as my brother says he will probably not be long—I might get his room ready all the same?"

"It is his right to have the best room in the house. He's the master now," said Dunham, but her voice trembled.

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham, you do not think I would take Aunt Caroline's room," said Jeanne, sincerely shocked.

"Why not 'm? She won't never want it no more. 'Tis my belief she'd have wished it. Though how that velvet pile carpet will stand cigarette ash I can't tell. I remember his poor father used to drop it about long ago."

"Did he indeed? But Louis does not smoke."

"That 's not likely by this time, ma'am, whatever he may have done when he left home," said Dunham, in a pitying voice, as though she thought cigarette-smoking must be hereditary.

"No, I assure you he is not a smoker. He would have told me, if he had become one."

"Gentlemen don't tell their sisters everything, ma'am, if you 'll excuse me," said Dunham.

Jeanne gave up the attempt to convince the old woman that Louis was the brilliant exception who proved this rule. But about the room she remained firm. Louis must not take Aunt Caroline's room. He would not like it at all. He was not used to a large room, and would think it too luxurious for a soldier.

"Then if Pyke and me is to have the best bedroom floor all to ourselves," said Dunham, severely, "which I can't think becoming, 'm, but far be it from me to say so, then there's nothing left but the nurseries, what have never been used since we came here."

Jeanne mounted the echoing stone staircase almost eagerly, to explore the upper floor, in company with her conductress.

"The stairs are very steep," she said, pausing before the little white gate at the top in order to allow Mrs. Dunham to recover breath. "I suppose long ago, when the house was built, they put this gate here to prevent the children falling down the stairs?"

"They put it up too late, by all accounts, Miss Jane," said Dunham. "This house belonged to poor Miss Marney's cousin, the late Duke of Monaghan. She bought it from him over twenty years ago; and they put up the gate after the little heir fell down this flight of stairs, and

was carried into her Grace's room—for dead."

"Was he killed?" said Jeanne, horrified.

"Crippled for life, ma'am. They sold the house in consequence. They say her Grace vowed she would never set foot in it again. She never came near your poor auntie. But the Duke called on her twice before he died," said Dunham, rather proudly, "and by all accounts she lost very little by not seeing the Duchess, for no one has a good word for her. They say she led the poor Duke a terrible life with her temper and all."

Jeanne looked pitifully at the scene of this long past catastrophe. She pictured "the little heir" running gaily forth from his nursery for the last time,—the fall—the cry—the silence—and the horrified nurse lifting a little crushed figure.

"This part of the house has not been touched, ma'am, since Miss Marney came here. It had all been done up fresh when the poor Duke succeeded, only a year or two before the accident. Miss Marney had no use for this floor, so she left it alone, and only decorated the rooms she occupied. She never came up here, the stairs being so steep and her heart weak. There's two very nice-sized bedrooms, ma'am, beyond this," said Dunham.

Jeanne walked through the empty and silent nurseries, softly, and on tiptoe. They seemed haunted by the ghosts of the children who had played there, and who must have climbed on to

chairs and tables when they wanted to look out of the high barred windows.

The walls were still covered with a faded paper of pictured nursery rhymes.

"We will leave these rooms just as they are," she said, "but oh, Mrs. Dunham, if you think I *might*, I would so much rather come up-stairs to one of these large empty bedrooms, and have the one next to mine made ready for *him*. It would seem almost like company to know he was coming, and besides—I think—surely the maids must be sleeping on this floor, just beyond the baize door? I am very often frightened at night, Mrs. Dunham—all alone among the empty drawing-rooms—if you won't think it foolish of me to say so, and I hear such odd noises. I sometimes feel as though the mahogany wardrobe must be walking about; it creaks so dreadfully."

"Why did n't you say so before, ma'am?" said Dunham, astonished. "'T is for you to give the orders. Your things shall be moved this very day. And the head housemaid shall sleep in a little room close by within call, as ought to be mine, only my poor lady would have me next door to her. To be sure I might have thought you would be nervous."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Dunham," said the poor little lonely lady, gratefully. For she was indeed unable to realise that it was she, after all, and

not Dunham, who was mistress of the house. Her conscience pricked her nevertheless, for the opportunities she made to ask Dunham's advice, or exchange a word or two with her.

"What would Aunt Caroline think of me?" she reflected, in dismay, now and then. "She said one must never talk to the servants. That is what it is to be what poor old Granny Morgan used to say Louis and I were; neither fish, flesh nor fowl, nor good red herring. At home I wickedly look down on Uncle Roberts and think myself more refined than he, and that a farmhouse is no place for a de Courset; when I am here, it is the farm which seems the most natural; and I feel like a doll stuck up and doing nothing, quite out of place; and would be glad if the youngest housemaid, the pretty one with red hair, might come and talk to me. She looks far more cheerful than Mrs. Dunham. Surely Aunt Caroline would not have called Mrs. Dunham exactly a *servant* after they had lived so many years together? She must have earned the right to be more of a friend. And if I talk to *nobody* I believe it would end in my going mad. I used to enjoy my meals, but now I would almost rather go without them, than be waited on in solemn silence by Hewitt and William."

A worse penance than those solitary repasts was the daily drive, which Dunham hinted that it behooved a lady, however lonely, to indulge.

Jeanne dared not refuse, for she was penetrated by an honest anxiety to carry out the wishes of her late aunt, and to prove herself a worthy representative of the family. She learnt from Dunham the daily routine of Miss Marney's life in London during the past twenty years, and endeavoured, as faithfully as possible, to pursue the same programme. But she was buoyed up by a secret hope that when Louis came home he would discover a less irksome régime to be equally suitable to her exalted position.

Thus she walked with Dunham every morning at noon, down Upper Grosvenor Street and into the Park, that the toy Yorkshire terrier might be carefully exercised in a leading string; and back again through Upper Brook Street and so home.

Jeanne might have enjoyed these expeditions had the weather been less cold, and had Dunham and the dog been able to walk a little faster. But the mincing steps of the aged maid were carefully timed to accord with the slow waddle of the obese lap-dog.

Dunham, gathering her rustling silk skirts in a bunch before her, held them up to display her old-fashioned elastic-sided boots, and picked her way nervously over the crossings, of which she had never been able to lose her rustic dread; whilst Jeanne, in a little black cloth jacket, suited rather to the warm west country and to her accustomed energetic tramping over hill and dale than

to the London east winds, shivered and dawdled by her side. But it occurred neither to her nor to Dunham to take Miss Marney's sables and sealskins out of their camphorated wrappings, and make use of them. They were preserved and tended as jealously as though Dunham expected their late owner to return at any moment, and demand them at her hands.

The drive was always taken in the immense double brougham, for it was Miss Marney's rule to have the close carriage out in winter, and the open carriage in summer, and Buckam the coachman had no notion of making changes at this time of life.

He was so ponderous and infirm that he had to be assisted on to the box; but once safely seated there, he drove carefully and well. William the Irish footman sat beside him, and they apparently decided together where the drive should be taken and how long it should last.

William's unfortunate low-comedy face, and his involuntary but perpetual smile as he daily touched his hat and waited for orders at the carriage door, caused the lonely lady, quite unjustly, to suspect him of laughing at her in his sleeve; and the very suspicion doubled her nervousness.

Every afternoon she stammered, "Please go—nowhere in particular—just drive about," and every afternoon, having thus uttered, she beat

her brains for a more dignified and sensible reply.

One day it occurred to her to enquire of Dunham why a stout red volume of addresses was always carefully handed into the carriage with the rug.

"It's the Red-book, ma'am," said Dunham, rather shocked at this new display of ignorance.

"I see it is a red book," said Jeanne, meekly, "but why must I take it out driving?"

"Why—though your poor auntie had given up paying visits for some time before she died—yet in case she had felt inclined to do so, of course she wanted the Red-book handy to look up where the people lived."

"I see," said Jeanne, but she understood nothing.

"There used to be a lot of cards left here, when we first came," said Dunham, nodding sadly towards the bowl of hoarded dingy pasteboards which decorated the table in the hall.

"Did Aunt Caroline know so many people when first she came to London?"

"She knew very few people, but she paid a lot of calls on people whom you might have thought would be glad enough to know her, seeing she was related by blood (though rather distant to be sure) to a many of them. She tried to distract herself after her poor brother's death by making new acquaintances, poor dear, which she never could have done in his lifetime, for he could n't abide

visitors. Though to be sure he grudged her nothing else; and she always had her clothes from Élise, and Worth, and all the grand places, though it often seemed a pity like, with no one to see them. But she liked to keep up a proper dignity, Miss Jane, as a lady in her position ought."

"Yes," said Jeanne, and her heart sank.

"But there, all her efforts came to nothing. She was too old-fashioned to take to new faces or new ways, and Londoners was too free and easy for her, as had been all her life Miss Marney of Orsett, and accustomed to take the lead and be deferred to. She just quarrelled with one after the other and that's about all it came to. And nobody comes to look for you in London, Miss Jane, be who you may."

"That is very true," and Jeanne sighed in sympathy.

"You can be more solitary here than ever you could in the depths of the country," said Dunham, shaking her head. "Where at the least the passers-by will give you good-day. So for the last ten or fifteen years we've been satisfied to keep ourselves to ourselves, willy-nilly, as a body might say. But it's different with you, missie; you're young, and have your life before you. It's not for me to advise you, 'm, but I would make friends while I was young, in your place, and not leave till it's too late, Miss Jane."

"That is just what my aunt said to me; that

I should have plenty of visits to make later on," thought Jeanne, and she recalled her aunt's injunctions to be exclusive. "I must be very careful whom I make friends with, however," she thought, anxiously.

It seemed to her that all London lay open to her choice; and the only question was—where to begin? It would have been hard to fathom the depths of Jeanne's social ignorance.

She consulted Dunham no further, but thought out the question of calls and callers for herself, in the light of the foregoing hints, and of her lively recollections of the visiting code of the Rector's wife at Coed-Ithel.

"She said she never lost a moment calling on new neighbours," thought Jeanne, "she said it was the duty of the residents. I wonder why nobody has called on me. Perhaps they think it too soon after poor Aunt Caroline's death; or perhaps they do not realise that any one is living here, and think I am just the companion, or somebody of that kind, waiting till the owner comes home. But I am the lady of the house really. I suppose it is my duty, as Dunham says, to make a few friends, but it is very hard to know where to begin."

She turned over the pages of the Red-book helplessly.

"The day after the first Sunday they came to church she always went," said Jeanne, "I re-

member that, because I asked her once why she waited till then, as one was not to lose a moment in welcoming them, and she said, only to give them time to settle down. Well—I suppose it must be the people living in the same square who are my neighbours,—anyway they are the nearest. The first time I see an arrival of a new family here put in the paper, I will make a start,” she resolved.

She scanned the advertisements in the fashionable column of the *Morning Post* very regularly for some days after making this resolution; and her scrutiny was presently rewarded by the announcement that Mr. and the Hon. Mrs. Wheler had arrived at 129 Grosvenor Square.

This was on a Friday.

Jeanne considerably allowed the proper interval to elapse, and on Monday afternoon when starting for her drive, she delivered an order to the astonished William which he had to repeat twice to Buckam on the box, before the coachman could believe his ears.

“Please drive me to 129 Grosvenor Square. I am going to pay a visit,” said the lonely lady, in a determined but shaking voice.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CALL

MRS. WHELER had entertained a small party of friends at an early luncheon, but when the clock struck half past three, she began to hope that they would not linger unduly over their coffee and cigarettes in the drawing-room, as they seemed much inclined to do—lest her programme for the afternoon be disarranged.

The butler, who was entirely in his employer's confidence on such matters, was also growing uneasy. He knew that Mrs. Wheeler had an important engagement at the other end of town, and he did not see how she would be able to keep it, and be home again in time for her bridge party at half past four, unless some sort of a move were made.

But then neither did he see how he could hurry the Duchess away.

He had already announced her Grace's carriage in a confidential whisper, not to interrupt more than was necessary her Grace's animated conversation with Mr. Wheeler; and the

Duchess said thank you, and went on talking to her host as though nothing had happened.

Of the other ladies, one was intending to walk, and being the least important of the three, did not like to make the first move; and the other, having no horses to consider, but a motor which conveyed her so quickly from one spot to another that she had some ado to fill up her afternoon in proportion, was not sorry to dawdle over her cigarette a little longer than usual.

The butler, being an adept at reading his lady's almost expressionless face, decided, as a desperate remedy, to admit callers; though Mrs. Wheler was never at home to anybody except by appointment, save one or two intimates, whose names were specially registered in the butler's brain.

Thus it came about that Jeanne was presently ushered into the presence of eight ladies and gentlemen seated round the spacious room; and into the midst of a buzz of conversation which the loud announcement of her name brought to a sudden though a momentary pause. For the space of a single second, eight pairs of eyes glanced curiously towards the smiling, dimpling, blushing countenance of the timid visitor.

Jeanne was abashed almost to faintness. Yet the room and its occupants were instantly impressed upon her consciousness, even as she paused, hesitating, upon the threshold.

A stately room, with red walls, dark pictures, a quantity of gilding, many mirrors, and a polished slippery floor.

One old bald-headed gentleman, two tall middle-aged gentlemen, and one young, rather small, fair gentleman.

A stout, short, commanding-looking lady, with a curled grey front, and a red face, talking in a very loud voice to the bald gentleman, and holding long-handled glasses to her short-sighted eyes. This was the Duchess.

A thin lady in rough tweed with a tartan blouse and an air of great distinction. This was the lady who did not feel important enough to get up and go away, though she, and Mrs. Wheler, and the butler, all wished that the party might come to an end. An exquisite languid lady in flowing draperies and a Gainsborough headpiece, who was the owner of the motor brougham.

And a lady to whom the only epithet that could be applied was the word "smart," and this was Mrs. Wheler; though it did not occur to Jeanne as a possibility, that the lady of the house, even at an early and informal luncheon, could be wearing a hat in her own drawing-room.

Mrs. Wheler was smart, and she was nothing else in particular. Neither kind nor cross, in temper; neither warm nor icy in disposition; neither interested nor bored by life in general. Even her appearance was of the negative order;

though it varied considerably with the changes of fashion.

When waists were worn high, she was short-waisted; when low, her body grew miraculously longer. Her abundant hair had been fair, until straw-coloured hair became too expressive, when it blushed a modest Titian red, which was darkening by easy stages into brown. Presently, as she grew older, a few silver threads would certainly appear, for Mrs. Wheler had a strong sense of the fitness of things; and nothing would have induced her to allow her hair to turn white, "in a single night," though when the time came, a *coiffure à la Marie Antoinette*, with dark eyebrows and lashes to form an agreeable contrast, would probably not be wanting. Yet she contrived to avoid all unpleasant obviousness of the artificial; presenting only, so to speak, her picturesqueness to the public, and keeping her methods modestly in the background, as becomes a true artist.

From habit Mrs. Wheler never made an engagement without writing it down; so she kept her memory clear for facts concerning that portion of humanity in which she was chiefly interested. Her mind was stored with their names; their relationships recognised or unrecognised; their doings and their undoings, and the approximate value of their social or financial status.

Racing and card-playing received a large share

of her conscious attention. Entertaining, visiting, slumming, and theatre-going, had become almost mechanical processes. Without referring to her engagement book she could hardly have told what she had been doing on the previous day.

Her mind, deprived of sufficient repose, learnt to rest though her body was in action; and remained blank, very often, whilst her person was being rushed from one function to another, whilst her lips were smiling, and her well-trained tongue uttering short platitudes.

It required something out of the ordinary to arrest her real attention.

Jeanne's appearance was something out of the ordinary, and for a moment Mrs. Wheler's mechanism of politeness ceased to work in consequence.

Then recovering her presence of mind, and recognising the butler's strategy at one and the same moment, she advanced to meet her unknown visitor, who was so obviously unable to distinguish her hostess, that general conversation was immediately and politely resumed, to give her an opportunity of explaining herself.

Nevertheless, the butler had triumphed, for the admittance of an afternoon caller produced the anticipated effect.

"Good gracious," said the Duchess, looking across the room at the Empire clock, and not perceiving that the hands were pointing to twenty

minutes past twelve, "I had no idea it was so late. I must fly. Now you will promise to consider what I have been saying, Mr. Wheler. It is persons like yourself to whom we look in this matter. Practical business-like men."

Mr. Wheler, who was on the Stock Exchange, and who desired rather to be considered fashionable than business-like, gave a somewhat sickly smile, and declared himself already convinced by the arguments of the Duchess,—the more warmly because she gave some evidence of a desire to repeat them all over again from the beginning.

Whilst he was engaged in combating this inclination by recapitulating them himself as rapidly as possible, Mrs. Wheler shook hands with Jeanne, and said, "How do you do?" in an uncertain puzzled voice.

"It was then that Jeanne found courage to utter the remark which she had rehearsed to herself at intervals ever since the announcement of the Wheelers' arrival in town had appeared in the *Morning Post*.

"I am very glad to see you, Mrs. Wheler, and I hope you are feeling a little more settled by this time, Mrs. Wheler?"

The heartfelt kindness of her tone, and careful repetition of Mrs. Wheler's name, were due to Jeanne's determination to follow her model as closely as possible. She reproduced the Rector's wife with great exactness.

But Mrs. Wheler's astonishment at this address was so painfully obvious that Jeanne was obliged to descend into a stammering explanation, in her own person.

"I live at 99, over the way," said Jeanne. "The house belonged to my aunt, Miss Marney of Orsett, and she is dead, and I am living there all alone till my brother comes home. I—I saw in the papers that you had only just arrived—so being such a near neighbour, I—I thought I would come and see you."

"Oh, indeed," said Mrs. Wheler, speechless.

The brown eyes grew larger, and the red cheeks turned white.

"I am afraid I must have done something wrong, or unusual, after all," said Jeanne.

Mrs. Wheler's vacant expression offered so little consolation, that she looked round, almost wildly, as though for a means of escape from the situation into which her ignorance had betrayed her.

Her glance fell upon the face of the young gentleman whose conversation with Mrs. Wheler her entrance had interrupted. He was so close that he must have heard the greetings which had been exchanged between his hostess and her uninvited guest, and Jeanne thought he looked rather sorry for her; her brown eyes conveyed to him an unconscious appeal for help.

The young man responded instantly to that

mute, almost despairing look, and flung himself gallantly into the breach.

"Ninety-nine was my father's old house," he said in very gentle and courteous tones. "Will you introduce me to Miss *chum—chum—chum*," with a polite mumble to cover his ignorance of Jeanne's name.

"The Duke of Monaghan," said Mrs. Wheler's mechanical tongue, before she remembered that she did not know in the least to whom she was presenting her visitor.

"Oh!" said Jeanne,—she forgot her embarrassment in her surprise and delight, "are you really—the little boy who fell down the nursery staircase?"

"I am indeed," said the Duke. His blue eyes regarded her with an expression in which mirth and melancholy held equal shares.

"But I was told you were crippled for life," she said ingenuously.

"Not quite so bad as that." He turned the conversation dexterously.

"Did I not hear you say that Miss Marney of Orsett was your aunt?"

"My great-aunt."

"My father had the honour of claiming cousinship with her," said the Duke, politely.

"Yes, she told me she bought the house from him. But then *we* are—we must be related, too," said Jeanne, and her face, returning to its

natural colour, looked quite happy and animated again.

"I hope so," said the Duke, with a little bow which she thought rather charming, but very old-fashioned in a boy of his years. Louis never bowed like that.

Here there was a general movement among the company, and every one advanced to take leave of Mrs. Wheler, who was listening, petrified, to this conversation.

The Duke springing from his seat, as his hostess rose, moved a pace or two forward, and Jeanne saw that he was lame.

Poor "little heir"!

Jeanne, conscious of her own rustic strength and ruddy health, felt very sorry for the Duke.

He was still rather little, scarcely taller than herself; slight and fair, and absurdly delicate-looking, she thought, for a man.

Jeanne had but one standard for manhood in her heart, and the Duke fell grievously short of it.

Louis, at twenty years old, when she had seen him last, in the very flower and perfection of youth, had measured six foot one in his stockings. She thought of his broad chest, his lithe slender form and active springing gait, his strong, muscular brown hands, and sunburnt face.

Poor sickly Duke! so little and weak and lame; and colouring like a girl with the mere effort of speaking to a stranger. Jeanne forgot her own

shyness in the warm pity which filled her heart.

"Good-bye, dear, I had such a delightful conversation with your dear good man, I could hardly tear myself away. I have been boring him quite *too* dreadfully," said the Duchess, meaning to be playful, and unaware that she was emphasising an unhappy truth. "Denis?"

"I am going to walk, mother," said the Duke.

The Duchess looked vexed.

With another gallant effort, causing yet a fresh variation from pallor to redness of his unfortunately tell-tale complexion, the young man boldly presented Jeanne to his parent, explaining the connection very clearly and briefly as he did so.

"A new cousin, dear me, how charming!" said the Duchess, looking rather disapprovingly at Jeanne through her glasses. "Do come and see me. I never understand relationships. It is quite hopeless, you know, for a stupid person like myself. I am generally in after five. Well, if you won't come, Denis, I must go alone." She turned once more to her hostess. "Good-bye, dear, it has been too nice seeing you again. Don't forget Wednesday at four; and I shall depend on you for all the prettiest things on our stall."

Mrs. Wheler assured her that she would not forget, Mr. Wheler escorted her Grace down-stairs, and the rest of the party gradually melted away.

The Duke in his turn shook hands, and Jeanne

watched him limping away across the great room, with much concern lest he should slip and fall upon the polished floor.

She came to herself with a start, observing that Mrs. Wheler was obviously waiting for her too to take leave and depart, though she did not speak until the door had closed behind the Duke.

"I am afraid I must ask you to excuse me. Pray don't think me rude, but I have an engagement," she said, with more civility than she would have shown, perhaps, had the Duke not been so good-natured as to claim cousinship with this rather shabby stranger; but still, without any kindness in her voice. Jeanne was too obviously a nobody, too rustic in appearance and manner, to make her a possible acquaintance for Mrs. Wheler, let her be related to whom she would.

Mrs. Wheler knew the Duchess of Monaghan well, and was acquainted with all her ways.

She had a loud and hearty manner, and was always as gracious to nobodies as only really great ladies can afford to be; and she always asked them to go and see her after five, and then forgot all about them.

They generally went, and then they heard that the Duchess was not at home, and derived what satisfaction they might from leaving their humble cards, and there was an end of it.

If she had really wished to seek the further acquaintance of her new cousin she would have asked

her to lunch, thought the experienced Mrs. Wheler. So she was civil but not *empressée* when she begged Jeanne to excuse her.

"Oh, I will go at once, Mrs. Wheler," cried Jeanne. She was distressed, but there were no servants present to make her nervous, and in her eyes Mrs. Wheler was a woman almost old enough to be her mother, who would surely, now that they were alone, be too kind to be angry, when she knew that her visitor had only trespassed through ignorance, and was sincerely penitent.

"Please forgive me, Mrs. Wheler," said poor rustic Jeanne, who had no idea how this constant repetition of her name jarred upon the well-trained instincts of her hostess, who was as full of conventional good breeding as she was empty of emotions. "In the country, where I was brought up, our Rector's wife used to call upon neighbours directly they arrived, and I thought it was the same in London. I am afraid it is all wrong, and I have done something dreadful. I saw it in all your faces, somehow, as I came in, and I could have sunk through the floor, Mrs. Wheler—but I am very lonely at home, and hoped I was going the right way to make a few friends by being neighbourly, and paying calls."

She looked anxiously into the impassive face. What odd fishy eyes had Mrs. Wheler, thought poor Jeanne; they looked through you, and at

the wall beyond, as though you were transparent, or not there at all.

"It would be very kind of you to explain why it was wrong, Mrs. Wheler," she faltered, and she realised that with every word she had spoken Mrs. Wheler had grown less interested, though her vague civility of tone and manner never faltered.

"I am afraid I have really no time for explanations—" she was walking to the fireplace, "of course I *quite* understand it was a mistake," her hand on the bell. "Pray think no more of it." She rang twice. "Would you like a cab sent for?—oh, you have a carriage."

She looked at the servant who entered, and this time her expressionless countenance spoke, and dumbly directed him to show the unwelcome guest out as speedily as might be.

Jeanne found herself walking down the grand staircase, wrapt as it were in a cloud of shame and mortification.

The Duke's lameness caused him, perhaps, to move very slowly. He was still in the hall, where the invaluable butler was carefully fitting him into his fur coat. His closely cropped head emerged from the black astrachan collar, looking very small and very fair; and he held his hat in his hand, and bowed politely to Jeanne, as she passed hurriedly by. She scarcely saw him.

The burning red of her cheeks, and the glis-

tening of tears on her downcast black lashes, caused him to divine that she had obtained scant comfort from her explanation with Mrs. Wheler.

He limped to the front door, and looked after her, in a hesitating, undecided manner, before asking for a hansom.

For Jeanne, instead of waiting decorously upon the steps of the mansion, for the late Miss Marney's massive equipage to be drawn up before the front door, flew past the astonished servants, past the yet more astonished William, who was standing on the pavement with the rug over his arm; and ran to the spot where Buckam and the fat horses were sleepily waiting, half way down the Square. She ran, she flew, she opened the door for herself, she scrambled into the carriage, and hid herself as quickly as she could within its friendly shelter.

Poor William, rug on arm, saw nothing for it but to pocket his dignity and run after her as fast as he could; but he was not young, and he was little accustomed to running, so that Jeanne had a moment's breathing space in which to collect her scattered wits and gather up her failing powers, before he arrived, panting, at the door of the brougham.

"Drive me home at once," she said with a courage born of despair. "I am—I am ill; at least I am tired—and I can't go any further to-day."

William touched his hat and mounted the box.

"She took and run like a lamplighter, and then she said she was ill!" he said in deep amazement to his fellow.

Jeanne held her head high as she descended at her own front door, and walked through the hall into the morning-room. But directly the door was shut behind her, she sank upon the couch and wept tears of humiliation.

"I must never let Louis know. He would be ashamed of me. Oh, how could I be such a fool. The sister of an officer and a gentleman! She might have been a little nicer, and me in mourning. If anybody in the kindness of their heart dropped in to see me—would I treat them so?"

Her tears relieved her a little; but alas, the lady of the house, even though she be a lonely lady, cannot weep at will. She cried with one eye, so to speak, on the door, lest Hewitt should come in to make up the fire before she had done; and presently crept to her room to remove all traces of her tears before Dunham should arrive to put away her outdoor things.

Dunham had sternly insisted that Jeanne must now be waited upon as beseemed the head of a household so magnificent; consequently the aged maid climbed the steep staircase for the purpose of hanging up in the wardrobe the little black hat and jacket which Jeanne could just as

easily have put away for herself, and for taking out of it the plain black gown which was only one of two that had been purchased as mourning for Miss Marney.

But it pleased Dunham to maintain this semblance of an occupation, and Jeanne was very willing to give her pleasure, and indeed, thankful for her company on any pretext, that she might indulge herself in the luxury of conversation.

As she mounted the nursery staircase in haste to be beforehand with Dunham upon this occasion, she cast a glance of pitying recollection at the little white gate, and thought of the young man who was paying a life-penalty for one woman's carelessness.

"He was *very* good and he had nice blue eyes, with a kind funny expression," she thought, "but oh, I shall never be able to think of the 'little heir' again in the same way. He must always have been fair and gentle, and not at all my idea of a man. I thought of a sturdy, beautiful, laughing boy like Louis used to be. Oh I *wish* I could tell somebody what I have done this day. I know I shall lie awake all night, thinking what a fool I have made of myself. It would be a relief to even tell Mrs. Dunham," but she struggled bravely against the temptation.

"Oh dear, oh dear! But I must keep it secret, if only for the sake of Louis, and because I am

a de Courset." Then she tried vainly to comfort herself.

"After all, it was only a mistake."

She looked up at the simpering disdainful face of the Comtesse Anne-Marie, which now smiled upon her from the wall of her bedroom, where she had ventured, now that the house belonged to Louis, to suspend the triple frame of miniatures.

"Mrs. Wheler would not have turned *you* away from her door," she said, proudly.

As soon as Dunham appeared, and after the fashion of womankind, Jeanne played round the edge of the secret she was determined not to betray.

"Who do you think I met to-day, Mrs. Dunham?"

"I am sure I can't say, ma'am," said Dunham, who, having already heard from William of her young lady's extraordinary exit from 129 Grosvenor Square, was burning with curiosity as to the why and the wherefore of such behaviour.

"The little boy who fell down the nursery staircase here! He is not a cripple, but slightly lame. He is grown up now, but he is still not very big, and looks very delicate for a man. The Duke of Monaghan."

"Well to be sure! I daresay you mentioned, ma'am, that the old rooms was kept just as they was?"

"I had very little conversation with him,"

said Jeanne, rather hastily, "I was very sorry for him though," and she added to herself, "and he looked a little sorry for me."

"Sorry for him, ma'am! It's not dukes and such-like as usually calls for sorrow," said Dunham rather shocked.

"If you had seen him, Mrs. Dunham, you would have been sorry for him too. He is so delicate-looking; and so fair that he blushes like a girl. Of course he is only a boy, and I dare-say he may be very shy."

"The accident happened over twenty years ago, ma'am; I can't quite think him so young as all that," said Dunham, rather stiffly.

"Is it possible? Then he must be as old as Louis when he left home! How dreadful! for beside him he would look as though a breath might blow him away. I don't mean he is n't very nice-looking in his way, Mrs. Dunham, but if a *man* is not straight and strong and active, I don't see what he's fit for," said Jeanne, whose views of mankind were strictly limited to the horizon of Louis.

"Well, 'm—there's many things he's fit for, if you ask me," said Dunham, with an increase of asperity. "A Duke is a Duke, and you may depend on it his Grace would find plenty of strong active men only too thankful to stand in his shoes, even if one of them is filled with a lame foot."

"His Grace—is that what he is called?" said Jeanne. "It sounds very pretty, but somehow more appropriate for a nobleman of the olden time, in a court suit and a powdered wig, than for just an ordinary young man with a black coat and a bunch of violets in his buttonhole."

"Dukes is not ordinary men, ma'am," said Dunham reproachfully, "I was brought up to respect my betters."

"Do you think that—his title makes him—your better?" said Jeanne, thoughtfully.

"Yes, ma'am, I do," said Dunham, who had the courage of her opinions. "I'm no Radical. Church and State is what I always says. If his ancestors was n't no better than mine it stands to reason they would n't have been made Dukes."

"There is something in that, Mrs. Dunham, and I'm rather glad you like titles so much, for I have always thought them prettier than plain names myself. But Uncle Roberts is a Radical, and he says he despises them."

"Most likely your uncle Roberts has never come across them, miss," said Dunham, snorting.

"I don't know that he has," said Jeanne, rather crestfallen.

"People as has them, is glad enough to wear them, ma'am, knowing well enough it gives them a right to be respected more than common folk."

"Are folk who have titles so much more respected than other folks—unless they are great—

really great I mean in other ways as well?" said Jeanne, rather doubtfully. "Living with Uncle Roberts I have never realised that. He always speaks of them as though he were rather sorry for them than otherwise, and Louis never said anything about it." Suddenly her face lit up with pleasure. "But now that Louis is rich, perhaps he will be able to buy back the Château de Courset, and the land that belonged to his ancestors, and claim his right to be called the Marquis de Courset. You would like to hear him called that, Mrs. Dunham, would n't you?"

"I can't say I should, Miss Jane."

"Not! But why?" said Jeanne, in surprise.

"Well ma'am, since you ask me, I have no opinion of foreign titles. An honest English marquis is a very different thing to a foreign marquee."

"Why is it different?" asked Jeanne, in a mortified tone.

"I can't say why, but so it is, 'm. People think nothing of it. In fact, if anything, they think the worse of you. I hope the Captain will be satisfied to stop as he is, for if he goes calling himself a marquee, or anything of that kind, it's my opinion," said Dunham, firmly, "that as likely as not, wherever the poor young gentleman goes, he'll be taken for an adventurer or an impostor, and get suspected of being no better than he should."

CHAPTER VIII

THE CALLER

HEWITT threw open the door of the morning-room, and with swelling chest and sonorous tones of deepest gratification announced,

"The Duke of Monaghan."

Jeanne came forward to greet her first visitor, looking both shy and eager, and the Duke as he shook hands, said,

"I hope I need not apologise for venturing to call, unasked, upon my cousin."

It did not occur to his inexperienced hostess that this introductory remark had been almost as carefully prepared as her own opening speech to Mrs. Wheler.

"Indeed, I'm only surprised and delighted," she said with honest joy, "I think it most kind and—neighbourly of you to come."

"Cousinly!" he said, accepting, with a smile, the low chair she drew forward for him as solicitously as though he were really the helpless cripple she had imagined him to be.

"Do you know that nobody has been to see me once since I arrived?" she said, wistfully,

"except professional gentlemen" (with a sudden reminiscence of her aunt's reproof) "who do not count as visitors."

"Don't they count?" said the Duke, amused.

"They do not," she said firmly. She felt that, though the Rector's wife might make mistakes, old Miss Marney must know better than this youthful gentleman, smile as he would.

Jeanne, however, felt inclined to smile too, as she looked at him.

It was certainly refreshing to see somebody young, and the Duke looked very young indeed to Jeanne,—hardly more than a boy.

He was also pleasant to behold. His clothes were so severely well cut, his collar so glossy, his boots so spotless, his fair hair so closely cropped, his buttonhole of violets so fresh.

Louis had always been particular about his clothes.

Jeanne smiled approvingly at her visitor, and he divined her approval and was secretly pleased, not knowing that it arose entirely from her fondness for seeing everybody and everything clean and tidy.

"Do many professional people come to see you?" he asked with polite curiosity.

"Not very many. Mr. Valentine came this morning, to explain to me all about the power of attorney, you know, that Louis is sending him—and other business matters,"—with dignity.

"This house and everything in it belongs to my brother Louis, but Mr. Valentine is to manage it all till he comes home, and I am taking care of the furniture and pictures. He is a soldier, you know, and now he is in Somaliland. He must have arrived in Obbia by this time. Just as he was coming home he was ordered there, from South Africa. He was all through the Boer War. And never was sick nor sorry once, nor wounded, though he was in so many battles."

"He was very lucky," said the Duke.

Jeanne interpreted his expression as one of regret, and answered it with the outspoken sympathy of a child:

"It must have been dreadful for you not to be able to go."

He coloured, but replied as simply as she had spoken:

"Thank you, yes, it was. But both my brothers went. It was rather rough luck on you, was n't it, his going? I suppose he is your only brother."

"How did you guess that?" she said, surprised.

His blue eyes twinkled more than ever. He was certainly a very pleasant-looking young man, though so unfortunate as to be neither tall nor strong.

"He is my only brother, and my twin. If you would like to hear about him—but of course I don't know if you would be interested—still, he is your cousin too," she said. The soft orange-

brown eyes glowed beneath the black lashes, and the fresh red lips parted, as she looked at him, pathetically unconscious of her own eagerness, yet obviously trembling with the hope that here, at last, she had found one who would be interested in Louis.

The Duke too was young, and solitary, and sympathetic. He drew his low chair a little closer to the Book of Beauty which lay upon the low table dividing them.

Her freshness and sincerity charmed him now as they had charmed him at his first meeting with her, when he had realised instantly (being, in spite of his youth, a man of the world) that her unconventional behaviour arose from no want of modesty, but from inexperience.

Her apparent boldness of action was as the boldness of the robin perching on the gardener's very spade—so timid that he will fly at a sudden movement, so confident that he trusts without proof or warrant the friendship of mankind.

Before Hewitt and William appeared with the tea-things, the Duke knew almost as much about his cousin Louis as Jeanne did herself.

He learnt of his successes at school, at Sandhurst, and in the army; he learnt that she had not seen him for five years—that she thought of him still as the bright, eager boy who had left her when he was scarce twenty years old, and that her life and heart and soul were filled with his image.

And he wondered how much the real Louis resembled the Louis of her faithful dreams.

"Look—I have his new photographs; the first he has had done since he left England. And he is so changed I can hardly believe it is Louis. But oh, how glad I am to have them," said the little sister, and she fetched, with hands that actually trembled with pleasure and excitement, a shabby desk from a corner where it lay hid from Dunham's disapproving eye.

"I brought it down from my own room, for it gives me something to do, when I feel too dull," she said apologetically, "to sort and arrange his letters and read them. Some of them are very interesting, at least to me," she added hurriedly, alarmed lest the Duke should ask to see them. "Of course they are rather private, for I am the only person he has to confide in, in the whole world, and it is just the same with me. There is only Louis, *really*. To-day I have the first letter he has written since he heard of Aunt Caroline's death, and of her leaving her great fortune to him. Doesn't it seem wonderful? For Louis always wished to be rich."

"Is he very glad?" said the Duke.

"He is not so glad but that I thought he would have been gladder," she said, unconsciously betraying her disappointment. "But Louis is always original and never takes things as one would expect. He is more full of the expedition,

and shipping the horses, than of anything else, but yes—he is very glad. He says, ‘Now all your dreams may come true,’ and that is a great deal for a boy, who is apt to laugh at one’s foolish dreams, you know.”

The Duke looked at the photograph of his new cousin, and saw a tall young soldier in *khaki*, with a face so much older than Jeanne’s that it was difficult to believe him her twin brother.

A stern good-looking face; with marked eyebrows meeting over the bridge of an aquiline nose, and a thick moustache partially veiling the short upper lip.

“He is a fine fellow,” said the Duke in interested tones. “I do not wonder you are proud of him.”

“Any one would be proud of him, for there is nothing he cannot do. He could never bear to be beaten,” she said, holding her head high.

“He does not look as though he would ever be beaten. I am sure he will get on.”

“If they give him a chance, if they are not jealous of him,—but I am always afraid they will be jealous—he is so young, and so clever,” said Jeanne, shaking her head over this mysterious reference to the powers that be. “And Louis is not one to think of his own interest. He is only *too* disinterested, a little too scornful and quick to show people what they ought to do—or he used to be; but he had very persuasive ways too. He was the only person who could ever manage

Uncle Roberts. And I daresay he has grown wiser still, with all he has been through, poor boy."

A tear rolled unheeded down her cheek and splashed on to the little bundle of letters clasped in her lap, as she told him how Louis in his poverty had yet managed to insure his life for his sister's benefit, and to pay his debts.

"To think he will never be anxious about money any more," she said, wiping her eyes. "It was *that* I could not bear, that a boy like him should be anxious; it was foreign to his nature. He was so generous that he could n't help spending, poor boy,—but it was his only fault. And now Aunt Caroline has saved him from those worries and troubles that made us wonder whether he would ever be able to stick to the army, after all he had gone through to get there."

She now told him about Uncle Roberts, and the why and wherefore of her arrival in Grosvenor Square, and how much disappointed she was in London life, but he thought her so pretty and so earnest as she said it that he did not even smile.

Young people are usually fond of talking about themselves, when they find an attentive and sympathetic auditor, and perhaps the Duke was no exception to the rule.

But he had the advantage of Jeanne in good-breeding, and thus found himself constrained to be, upon this occasion, only a listener.

His courteous attention never wavered for an

instant; though it is possible he might not have been so exemplary in his politeness had her personality appealed to him less strongly. As it was, he enjoyed the opportunity her conversation afforded him to observe her at his leisure; as he rested comfortably in poor Miss Caroline's easiest chair, sheltered by a glass screen from the roaring fire which Hewitt had built up, with a zeal proportionate to the visitor's rank.

She was dressed in the plainest of black mourning gowns, with snowy collar and wristbands; but her hands and throat were white and soft enough to bear the contrast.

He thought he had never seen colouring so pure with eyes and hair so dark; nor half so pretty an effect as the pointed shadows cast by those down-cast black lashes upon the clear red of her cheeks.

Her beauty was beauty of the round, childish, dimpled order; but she looked so healthy, so innocent and so modest, that her little rusticities were all "in the picture," as the young man told himself in the jargon of the day.

It was only the setting that was all wrong.

This garish room with its meaningless mixture of modern fashion, and relics, real or imitation, of a by-gone day.

This wistful creation of an old woman trying to identify herself with the present, which she neither understood nor cared for, instead of

clinging to the past which was one with her, and to which she belonged.

Typical of Aunt Caroline was the juxtaposition of her antiquated harp and a brand-new Bechstein grand piano; as was the *mélange* of Moore's Irish melodies and Bellini's operas, with the latest burlesques of the day, in her music-holder.

Jeanne knew not a note of music. Her studies had not included pianoforte playing; partly on account of Cecilia's jealousy, and partly because the Rector's wife had pointed out that, since there was no piano at Coed-Ithel, it would be waste of time for her to learn. She had been very glad to be spared the trouble, for Cecilia's scales and exercises did not sound very tempting, and the less so because Jeanne had an ear for harmony.

Miss Caroline's new piano was therefore wasted upon her niece; but the Duke was a musician, and had consequently noted it directly he entered the apartment which, as he observed, made such an inappropriate background for Jeanne's rustic prettiness.

So she was a farmer's niece. That of course accounted for it all. He saw her, as in a picture, at home upon the mountains, her dark hair blowing in the wind, her red cheeks and dark eyes bright in the sunshine of her native Wales, her pretty hands busied among the flowers of a garden bounded by tall hedges of clipped yew—or working

in the cool dark dairy among the red earthen pans of frothing milk.

In such places would this simple maid be at home, but never—never in a modern drawing-room. Starting from a reverie, he found his hostess inviting him, but with a pretty solicitude and hesitation, to visit the old nurseries if he chose.

"Nothing is changed," said little Jeanne. "There is the white gate at the top of the steep staircase, which your father, I suppose, had put up."

"I don't remember that," he said, shaking his head.

"Of course not. It was put up after—your dreadful accident," she said with pitying eyes and lowered voice. "But that is the only change. There are the barred windows, and the nursery-rhyme paper—only it is rather faded and dirty I am afraid."

"Ah, I recollect that," he said quite eagerly. 'As I walked up Pippin Hill,' was my favourite, because the pretty maid was so very pretty, and the hill so remarkably steep. And the other was Curly-locks sitting on a cushion to 'sew a fine seam'!"

"Yes, yes," said Jeanne, delighted. "But there are several others, Tom the Piper's son, and Simple Simon."

"So there were, I can see it all perfectly."

"You have a very good memory then, for

you must have been quite a baby, since it was over twenty years ago."

"I was nearly six years old."

"Nearly six! And it was over twenty years ago! Then you must be as old as I am," she said, astonished. "Louis and I were twenty-five in October."

"I was twenty-five last April," he said smiling. "I am even a little older than you are!"

"And I have been thinking of you as quite a boy, about eighteen or nineteen," she said, ingenuously.

He would have minded more had he been five years younger, and above all, had she not blushed as she said it; as it was, he rather enjoyed her discomfiture.

"I am afraid I must put off visiting the scene of my disaster," he said, smiling, as he rose from the low chair before the fire. "I have trespassed upon your good nature rather a long time already. But perhaps—I venture to hope—you will let me come again one day?"

He stood beside her, and held the hand she gave him for a moment longer than is quite usual in shaking hands; but Jeanne was too fluttered to observe it.

"Must you go?" she said with sincere regret. "Oh yes, please come again, and let it be soon, as soon as you can; for I should like to ask you so many things, which it would be easier to ask

you than Mr. Valentine, since you are my cousin, and young—though not so young as I fancied,” she laughed shyly.

“It is much easier to talk to people of one’s own age,” said the Duke.

“That is just it. But it is one of my chief faults that I talk too much when once I set off, and don’t let the other person talk at all; and then they go away, and I recollect they have said nothing—only listened to me——”

This was so much the true state of the case in the present instance that the Duke could not help laughing outright.

“It will be *my* turn to talk when I come again,” he said consolingly.

“That reminds me of Louis; when he used to come home from school, we took it in turns by the clock, to speak. Five minutes each. There was so much to say,” said Jeanne, seriously. “I had no idea I should have had so much to say to you, however. But all these weeks and weeks I have been so silent that I suppose it all had to come out with a rush. Yet I *did* want to ask you——”

“Anything you will?”

“Was it a very wrong thing I did the other day, going to call on Mrs. Wheler?”

“Not in the least *wrong*. In the country it would have been quite right. I saw at once why you had mistaken. It was just that you were not used to London.”

"Then what is the rule here?"

"Here you may live in a house for twenty years, and scarcely know your next door neighbour by sight."

"Then how do you ever make new friends?"

"People are introduced to you—and you ask them to call—" he said laughing and reddening, "just as you might have asked me, only you did n't."

"But I would in a moment if I had known it was a right thing to do," Jeanne assured him, earnestly.

"I hoped that was so, and that is why, being your cousin, I ventured to come," he said, and his blue eyes twinkled merrily. "Is there anything else you wish to ask me?"

"Only this: I am afraid you will think me ignorant, but if I *am* ignorant, it is better to tell the truth. I do not quite know, for instance, what I ought to call you, nor even know how I should address a letter to you—not that I was thinking of writing—" she added hurriedly.

The Duke appeared not to notice her confusion.

"I should like you—if you would—as I am undoubtedly related to you through the Marneys of Orsett,—to call me Cousin Denis—as my other cousins do—" he said instantly. "And I am afraid you will think *me* very ignorant, for I was obliged to ask for 'Miss Marney's niece'!" And as I am very bad at knowing how to spell people's

names,—even when I do know them, if you will be kind enough to write down yours for me, I will write down mine for you.”

Jeanne moved with alacrity to the writing table and set forth materials for this purpose.

“I should like to call you Cousin Denis very much, and I hope you will call me Cousin Jeanne,” she said brightening up. “*Duke*” sounds so unnatural somehow, to me. And I can’t tell you how glad I am to find some relations. I have always longed to be like other people, and have cousins and uncles and aunts. Uncle Roberts is a bachelor, you see, and the last of his family; and Aunt Caroline was a spinster, and the last of the Marneys of Orsett.”

“Orsett Hall was burnt down, I remember,” said the Duke. “I have always heard it was one of the finest places in the West of England, noted for its picture gallery.”

“Most of the pictures were saved, you know,” said Jeanne. “They are upstairs.”

“I should like to see them some day,” he said with great animation.

“I will ask Mrs. Pyke to uncover them. They are all covered up.”

“Covered up, but why?”

“Mrs. Pyke is afraid of the gold frames being fly-blown; and Aunt Caroline was afraid the London smoke would hurt them,” explained Jeanne. “You see she could not get used to

London smoke after living for sixty years in the country."

"And such a beautiful country."

"Do you know it?"

"My mother has a house on the other side of the county, near Exmoor. We used to be there a great deal."

"I hoped you lived in London."

"I *live* in Ireland,"—he said smiling, "but we are a good deal in London too. My mother likes it."

"I had looked forward to London; but now I am quite sure I like the country far, far better," she said mournfully. "Still—" she brightened up again. "It is nicer now that I know I have relations here. It is very pleasant to have relations."

"I hope you may find me a pleasant relation," he said and he made her another grave little bow, in the manner Jeanne had observed before to be so old-fashioned, and yet so pleasing, in a person of his years.

As he opened the door she sprang forward, blushing even more than ever.

"Cousin Denis—would you—would you like one of his photographs?" said Jeanne. "He has sent me six. I—I could spare you a copy if you liked."

"I should like it of all things," said the Duke, and he received it gratefully.

"I wonder if that was right, or too—too fa-

miliar," thought Jeanne, as the door closed upon him, and she ran to the bell and rang it, as she had observed Mrs. Wheler did, for her departing guests. "Oh! I hope I have not babbled—as Louis used to call it—too much. But he was so kind, and I am *sure* he was interested. So now the Duchess will see Louis's photo, for he will certainly show it to her. I hope she will be as much struck with it as poor Aunt Caroline was with the one in my locket. Or more, since Louis is handsomer than ever. But how he is changed—it is not his laughing face. The war has aged him—or perhaps seeing so many of his comrades die. Oh, Louis, Louis—if you would but come safely home."

The serious eyes of the photograph seemed to return her gaze, and to suggest that thoughts unspeakably sad and lofty lay behind that grave young brow.

Decidedly Louis had grown older.

She turned with relief to the familiar, boyish face in the locket; now restored to its resting-place next her heart.

"When he talks and laughs with me—his dear face will come back to me as it used to be," she said, and the tears filled her brown eyes. "Oh, Louis—I have waited so long that I sometimes feel the day will never come."

As Jeanne changed her day gown for the plain

black muslin which Dunham had placed ready for her, and insisted she should wear every evening for her solitary dinner, she received, instead of the delighted congratulations she expected, a solemn warning from her self-appointed maid and guardian.

"Yes, ma'am, I don't deny it was attentive of the young gentleman to call—though to my thinking it's a pity he should have waited till my poor lady was dead, what was nearer to him than ever you was, Miss Jane—but like seeks like. And Hewitt tells me his Grace is young-looking for his age, as you are yourself, Miss Jane. Eighteen or twenty I would give you, and not a day more."

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham, I hope I look older than he does."

"Maybe so and maybe not. There's his age in Debrett for all to see, and Hewitt and me looked it out this very day. But it's a very distant cousinship if at all, as Mrs. Pyke has been telling. I would have liked it better, ma'am, if the Duchess, his mamma, had come along with him. I don't hold much, ma'am, with single young gentlemen calling on single young ladies without their mammas coming with them."

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham, what could be the harm?" said Jeanne. She felt inclined to cry. Was she to shut the front door in the face of her only visitor to please Dunham?

Had she made another mistake? People living

in Grosvenor Square were governed by rules that would never occur to the inhabitants of Coed-Ithel, where if one was lucky enough to possess a cousin, he would be made welcome as a matter of course.

She thought of the Duke, his politeness, his gentleness, above all his lameness. How could she appear ungrateful for the kindness he had shown? She blushed as she recalled her warm and pressing invitation to him to call again as soon as might be. Jeanne began to feel Dunham's *surveillance* a tiresome thing; but she had lived under authority all her life, and had not the courage to defy the old woman.

The brightness died out of her eyes and cheeks, and the dull weary expression returned. Her lips quivered. She yearned so terribly for companionship.

"Is there anything more I can do for you, ma'am?"

"Nothing more, thank you," said Jeanne, with sinking heart.

Dunham had done enough for one evening, was her dismal reflection. Spoilt the recollection of the first happy afternoon she had spent since her arrival; and all her anticipations of future visits from her kind cousin Denis.

"Are you quite sure, Mrs. Dunham," she faltered, "that I ought not to have visits from single gentlemen, who are relations—however nice and polite, and well known they may be?"

"Not without their mammas has called, ma'am. I'm very sure of that. If you was n't alone it would be another matter."

"If I was n't alone—I should n't want him," said Jeanne, almost petulantly. "After all I *was* introduced to his mamma, Mrs. Dunham, and she asked me to go and see her."

"Then I should go, ma'am."

"Would that make it all right for Cousin—for the Duke to come and see me, do you think?"

"It's not for me to advise my betters, ma'am. I hope I know my place too well. A hint is a very different thing to giving advice," said Dunham, closing her thin lips in a manner which, as Jeanne knew by this time, meant that either she had nothing else to say, or that, having more in her mind than prudence permitted her to reveal, she intended to keep it all to herself.

"Mrs. Dunham is a *very* unsatisfactory companion," sighed Jeanne.

As she went down the echoing stone staircase of the mournful empty house, and walked into the silent morning-room to await Hewitt's solemn announcement of dinner, she was seized with a sudden despair.

"I won't—I can't bear it any longer," cried Jeanne, "I am too wretched and solitary. I shall go mad here all alone, waiting and waiting for Louis, and nobody allowed to come near me. It is all very fine to say I am taking care of his

furniture and his house, but what do they leave for *me* to do?"

She looked wildly round for inspiration, and her eyes fell on her shabby desk, standing among the costly trifles on the occasional table, and looking sadly out of place there.

Yet how solid and handsome she had thought the old leather case when it stood on the painted window ledge of her attic at home.

At home.

The word brought the inspiration which Jeanne was unconsciously seeking; it pointed out the way of escape, even for a moment, from the intolerable *ennui* of her life in Grosvenor Square.

She took an instant resolve. To-morrow morning—would it could be to-night—she would go *home* to Coed-Ithel, and entreat her Uncle Roberts either to come back with her, or to let her stay at home till Louis returned. At least Uncle Roberts would not tell her that it was not his place to advise her; and though his experience of what should or could be done by young ladies living in Grosvenor Square must be very limited he was nearly as old (in Jeanne's eyes), and quite as sensible as Dunham.

He had sometimes talked of his intention to go and see the sights of London before he died.

Surely she could put it to him delicately, that now was the very time, since he could not expect to live for ever.

Jeanne would have been glad enough to see the sights of London herself—had she been quite certain what and where they were.

But she had not liked to enquire, lest she should be suspected of hankering after amusements instead of mourning her aunt; her kind aunt who had given all she had in the world to Louis.

Secretly Jeanne felt quite sure that Miss Caroline would rather have sympathised than otherwise with her wish for companionship, and her longing to let a little brightness in upon the dulness of her life; but she was not by any means so sure of Dunham, and it was Dunham who now practically governed the house, and had almost assumed Miss Marney's place therein. Mrs. Pyke was too old, and Hewitt too stupid, to contend against her rule.

The old servants clung faithfully to their duties, and watched with jealous eyes for the least symptom of a desire on the part of the little upstart stranger to rebel in the slightest degree against the traditions of the house.

Jeanne was uneasily conscious of their watchfulness, and it increased her timidity and discomfort in her solitary state.

She respected Dunham, and Pyke, and even the serious upper housemaid, who never, it seemed to her, spoke at all; even Hewitt and William and the stout coachman held some share in her regard. They were all so respectable, so steady,

and so faithful to their duties. But she could not help, for all that, secretly looking forward to the time when Louis should descend like a bombshell upon this dull and solemn household, and scatter the old traditions and the silence and the solemnity to the winds. Louis with his merry laugh, and imperious will, and cheerful disregard of difficulties.

Far from never allowing young gentlemen to come near the house without their mammas, thought Jeanne, indignantly (for the phrase rankled), she was assured he would, on the contrary, fill it with his friends from morning till night; and Louis had many friends, for he was constantly referring with enthusiasm to one or the other of them. A revelation was certainly in store for the old servants.

She took out his last letter.

"Of course the cable could n't go into detail" (Louis had written), *"but it looks as though our hard times were over for evermore, my Jeannie dear. If old Valentine and Thingumbob are my solicitors now, (sounds very magnificent) — they will see you have everything you want in this world, till I can arrange to go shares with you, as of course I shall when I come home. I'm writing them all sorts of directions by this very mail."*. . . (That was so like Louis! always perfectly ready and willing to give orders, where

Jeanne would have hesitated and scrupled for weeks). . . "Oh my Jeannie, if you knew what an immense load this had lifted off my chest. God bless poor Aunt Caroline. I shall be able to write more when I get your letters and Valentine's. I hear from my boss here that he knows the firm, and it's a first-rate west-end firm, so I can trust the old boy straight away, which is a comfort. Thank God it came just before I started, which enables me to do all necessary business before I leave, besides sending me off with a light heart. My chief advises me to send old Valentine a power of attorney which he thinks will facilitate matters for you greatly. . . I have been so occupied that I've had no moment to sit down and write a coherent letter, and now that I try I can't concentrate my thoughts. I went on board the ship this morning, and after three years' blissful forgetfulness of ships, the same old feeling of nausea came over me that always assails one as one gets the first whiff of engine-room, kitchens, etc., and all the vile things that make life on board intolerable to many landmen. . . .

"I am so anxious for your first letter, writ on receipt of my telegram about Somaliland. I hope you won't be too disappointed, my darling Jeannie, but quite cheerful when you think it is to be but a short trip. No more three-year wars, I hope. If you can find any, send me some maps of the country I'm going to, but nothing else, however rich we may be!

"God bless you, my gentle Jeannette; think what times we shall have when we meet. I've no end of surprises in store for you, and how we will make the money fly! . . . I am forgetting this is a sad time for you, though, and you may be crying your dear eyes out for poor Aunt Caroline. But for my sake cheer up, and be as happy as ever you can. I hope I shall find letters from you waiting at Obbia. . . ."

Louis bade her cheer up; and if he were here, he would understand in a moment how utterly impossible was cheerfulness under the circumstances, for his doleful and isolated little sister.

With beating heart she rang the bell, and desired William to say that the carriage would be wanted first thing in the morning to take her to Paddington.

"He will tell Hewitt, and Hewitt will tell Mrs. Dunham, and she will tell Mrs. Pyke, and so the ice will be broken," she thought, triumphantly. "That will make it easier for me to just say casually to Mrs. Dunham, at bedtime, that I have made up my mind rather suddenly to go home and see Uncle Roberts for a couple of nights or so. I am very glad I have settled it. Now there can be no drawing back"; and the lonely lady, outwardly composed, but inwardly quaking, presently sat down to her solitary meal.

CHAPTER IX

THE MOUNTAIN FARM

COED-ITHEL stood in the middle of an orchard; a plain stone-tiled farmhouse with no pretence to an approach, save a track over the grass from the yew-shadowed gate to the door.

A low, uneven wall, built without mortar, of great boulders and slabs of stone, coated with moss, and sprouting with hardy ferns and pennywort, enclosed the orchard; and though the old garden of the Duke's imagination was non-existent, there was a large plot of ground, fenced in from the chickens, at the back of the homestead, which was devoted mainly to growing potatoes, cabbages, and onions, but was also well stocked with the roots of old-fashioned herbs and cot-tager's flowers.

It had not occurred to Jeanne to telegraph and warn her uncle of her intended visit; a telegram, as she very well knew, would have startled him much more than her sudden appearance; besides entailing a payment of portorage which would have annoyed him considerably.

Since Dunham had refused to permit her to make a brown paper parcel of necessities to carry under her arm (which would have been much more convenient) and had, instead, insisted upon encumbering her with her late aunt's travelling bag—Jeanne had been obliged to leave her belongings at the station to be called for later by John Evans, her uncle's man.

She carried in her hand only her shabby desk, containing the family treasures, from which, true to her brother's injunctions, she would not be parted.

The daylight was beginning to fail as she walked rapidly along the main road, and turned into the narrow lane, which led upwards to the open path over the hills to Coed-Ithel.

A joyous sense of freedom regained caused her heart to lighten and her face to glow; as with the ease of youth and strength, and long habit, she climbed the steep and stony track over the mountain, pausing now and then to cast a glance of recognition at the familiar landscape.

Breathless, but beaming, she presently pushed open the orchard gate, sped across the grass, lifted the latch of the farmhouse door, and stepped into the kitchen.

A pleasant sense of home-coming, never before experienced, brought the tears to her glad brown eyes.

She had not known that the familiar place of

her childhood was dear to her, before she went to London. Often and often had she and Louis grumbled over its smallness, its homeliness, and its distance from Tref-goch, once the centre of life to both.

Now its very remoteness from the dwelling-houses of other men seemed to make it more truly a place of rest.

She closed the door and came softly round the old solid oaken screen, built into the wall, that sheltered her uncle's patchwork covered arm-chair from draught.

One half of the well-scrubbed white deal table was laid for tea. A big loaf, a black-handled knife, a square lump of fresh yellow butter, a red earthen pitcher of milk, and a pot of jam.

The black teapot stood warming on the hob, and the kettle was boiling.

Well-known sounds in the back kitchen told her that Uncle Roberts had come in, and was cleaning himself at the pump.

Not wishing to startle him too much, she rapped on the wooden screen with her knuckles, and stood there smiling and dimpling.

Uncle Roberts came forth immediately, clumping heavily across the tiled floor of the back kitchen in his heavy boots, wiping his hands with a cloth—and peering under his bushy brows to see who it was.

"I've come to pay you a visit, Uncle," said Jeanne.

Llewellyn Roberts was not a demonstrative man; he endured the kiss his niece bestowed upon his hairy cheek with equanimity, and said, "Well, to be sure!" in surprise.

It did not occur to him to express any pleasure at her advent, but Jeanne knew him well enough to be quite sure he was glad to see her.

"You got my letter, Uncle, didn't you, about Louis going to Somaliland?"

"I got it right enough," said Uncle Roberts.

He went to the bottom of the deal staircase and called loudly,

"Sally Morgan! Here's Jenny come home," and then with a nod, retired to the back kitchen to complete his ablutions.

Granny Morgan was less impassive than the farmer.

She was a rosy, little old woman, with a white cap tied under her chin, and a short, full woollen skirt cut well above her blue stockings and neat clogs.

Though, like the farmer, she loved Louis the best, she was yet very fond of Jeanne.

"Well, to be sure, my deary, this is a surprise. So here you be come home. Just in time for your tea—" she kissed Jeanne heartily. "Have you brought any news, deary?"

"Louis was just starting for Somaliland when

he last wrote, Granny, and he says it won't be long before he comes home."

"Oh, my, what a day 't will be—the lads down to Pen-y-waun be going to carry him shoulder high the day he comes—they talk of fireworks and all sorts. And he'll be grander than ever, with all this money."

"It won't change him, Granny."

"No, it won't, my deary, for the lad's not the sort to change. Well, if I did n't always say he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. It's to be hoped they *won't* be keeping him out there much longer."

Then she raised her voice and cried to the back kitchen,

"Roberts, your tea's waiting."

She poured the boiling water into the teapot and set it on the table.

"You'll be wanting something after your journey, deary. Dontee stop for nobody, but just set to."

But Jeanne knew better than to incur her uncle's displeasure by beginning before he had said grace.

Uncle Roberts stood in his place, and asked a blessing with his eyes shut, and Granny Morgan put the bread platter at his elbow.

Jeanne had not enjoyed a meal so much for weeks.

How delicious to her the home-made crusty

bread, the yellow butter slightly salted! She abjured the tea, and drank her accustomed measure of new milk, from her own blue china mug, inscribed in gilt letters, "A present from Monmouth."

Uncle Roberts was evidently cudgelling his brains for the reason of his niece's sudden appearance; but being chary of words, preferred thinking to asking questions.

Presently he brought forth the result of his cogitations.

"Be there anything wrong with this fine fortune his aunt left to Louis?"

"Oh no, Uncle. Mr. Valentine, the lawyer, says it is as safe as the Bank of England."

"Dontee get putting your trust in lawyers," said Uncle Roberts, gloomily.

"They have been—I mean the firm—lawyers to the Marneys of Orsett for three generations," said Jeanne.

"That sounds respectable, farmer," said Granny Morgan, who was of an optimistic disposition.

Uncle Llewellyn allowed it to be in Mr. Valentine's favour.

"Who's taking care of this fine house, now you've come away?" he asked, rather anxiously.

"The servants," said Jeanne.

"You've been and left Louis's house to servants. Why 't is chock full of valuable things, baint it?"

said Uncle Roberts. "They ought to be took care of."

"But there are fifteen servants to take care of them, Uncle."

"Farmer! you baint reasonable," said Mrs. Morgan. "Them upper servants are n't like the girls we keep. Was n't it on the letter you sent, my deary, that the housekeeper or such had been with the old lady forty or fifty year?"

"They have all been with her for years and years. Oh Uncle, if you could see how respectable and to be trusted they are," said Jeanne, almost appalled by such doubts. "Besides," with a perception that no words of hers could convey the full measure of Pyke's and Dunham's respectability to her uncle, "if it comes to that, Uncle, the lawyer's clerks, or the Government, or somebody—have taken lists of everything in the house, down to the very spoons."

"That will be for probate," said Uncle Llewellyn. "These 'ere death doos will come pretty heavy on Louis, I'm thinking."

"But you've always held the rich should be taxed, have n't you, Uncle?" said Jeanne, timidly.

"In the abstrack,—yes"—said Uncle Roberts pulling his red beard. "Tax the rich, I says—in the abstrack."

Uncle Llewellyn did not like argument; which being interpreted, meant that he liked to state his own opinion, but did not wish to hear the

opinion of any one else; so his womenkind were respectfully silent, and he recovered his spirits.

"But I daresay there 'll be plenty left."

"Mr. Valentine says Louis will be very rich."

"H'm" said Mr. Roberts, and it was plain that he was not altogether delighted at the prospect.

"What fair beats my understanding is—why the old woman did n't leave her money to you," he said, thumping the table. "The lad being started and doing well for hisself, and having me to look to besides, and you being with her. It makes me feel fair evil to think of it. Did she take anything amiss with you?"

"No, indeed, uncle, we were the best of friends. Mr. Valentine said it was because she liked me so much that she decided to alter her will, and leave her money to Louis instead of to charities."

"'T was a rum way of showing her liking for *you*."

"Oh, Uncle Roberts, you know it comes to just the same thing. Louis and me! I would rather Louis had it."

"You was all for giving up everything to him, deary, all your life. But you see if he does n't make it up to you when he comes home. Wednesday's children is all for loving and giving, and you was both born of a Wednesday."

Uncle Roberts grunted, and pushed back his chair.

When tea was over, and as Jeanne assisted

her to wash up the tea-things, Mrs. Morgan explained the cause of the farmer's depression.

"He's been worritting hisself like ever since the news came, and no wonder. There he was, thinking that the lad would come after him here; and all his affairs settled so he would n't have nothing to fret over on his death-bed when his time do come as come it must. And quite pleased to think your aunt should have you up to town to make a lady of you and provide for you; and now he's all unsettled. I know his mind mis-gives him but the boy will be took up with this fine fortune and look down on the farm—like; and yet he can't abear to be at the trouble and expense of going over to Tref-goch and letting Lawyer Williams alter his will. 'Sally Morgan,' he says to me, 'I thought that was over and done with.' He've not been the same man since. Thinking maybe 't is *you* as ought to have the farm now, in justice."

"Oh, don't let him alter anything. But I'll tell Louis to write to him, for he will never listen to you or me," said Jeanne. "But if the Rector would advise him to put off making any changes till Louis comes home, that would be the best."

"Dear heart, the Rector and his wife have been away this many weeks. Most ever since you left."

"Away!"

"'T is that Cissie at the bottom of it all. They

say her would n't answer her mother's letters, so poor Mrs. Davies at last her took to her bed with grief and spite, to think her own daughter should treat her so. And she could n't keep it to herself, for Molly Jones at the Post-office her spread it abroad as Mrs. Davies wrote five letters and a post card running, and never a one come back from Mrs. Watson for her."

"But why won't she write?"

"They say she's too stuck up; but perhaps 't is just that she's took up with her long family, and got sick of wasting so much money on stamps, for they say she's a long ways off in South America travelling with her old gentleman. Mrs. Davies was always terrible over-fond of Cissie, and now the girl's paying her out for it. 'T is always the way. But she was that bad, poor thing, as the doctor advised her should go to foreign parts. Ah, well, I miss her, for she gave me many a box of patent medicine one way and another, and my inside being not what it was, needs a lot of physic."

But Jeanne grew impatient of the symptoms Mrs. Morgan now proceeded to describe in detail, and brought the conversation back to her uncle.

"Yes, he be terrible interested with all the lad sends, though he baint fond of writing letters nor yet of reading them, as a rule. But he boasts away when he thinks I are n't listening, to John Jones and Davy Griffiths, whenever they comes

here. Men 's all alike, my deary; they be ashamed of loving their own flesh and blood till they be away from them, and then out it comes—willy nilly."

She nodded and winked at Jeanne when Uncle Llewellyn grumbled at having to send John Evans all the way to the station for Jeanne's bag.

"Nice fine lady ways you 've got into, Jenny," he said, shaking his head at her.

"There 's Louis's photographs in the bag; they were too big to fit into my desk. He was photoed before leaving South Africa," she breathed.

"What was that for?"

"For me—and for you, Uncle. He 's changed ever so; as one would expect in so many years," she said, with her pretty timid smile.

Uncle Roberts made no answer, but she heard him presently shouting to John Evans to make haste, and not be all night fetching the things up from the station.

Jeanne finding herself alone in her little attic beneath the roof, hung the miniatures again on the brass hooks Louis had placed for them long ago, over the tiny fireplace. She was for the first time struck by the incongruity of their surroundings.

What had her silk-clad, jewel-decked, powdered, beribboned ancestors to do with this white washed room and flock paper?

How very, very small and poor it all looked! How hard the narrow bed, and rough the cotton sheets; how small and lumpy the pillow, stuffed with poultry feathers by old Granny Morgan's wrinkled hard-working hands.

Jeanne blushed with shame at herself for noticing such things, and for the reflection that crossed her mind that dear old Granny was much less refined in speech and appearance than Dunham, and would probably courtesy to Mrs. Pyke in her black silk gown and Chantilly lace cap. Was it possible that the old woman's endless stories of her ailments had become fatiguing instead of interesting to hear; or that she could draw comparisons between the manner of serving meals in Grosvenor Square and in the farmhouse kitchen, to the disadvantage of the latter?

The pricking of her conscience reminded her of many a reproof she had bestowed upon Louis in the past, for grumbling when he returned from school or college, at some of the primitive domestic arrangements at the hillside farm; and it reminded her also of the sweet-tempered meekness with which he had received her ignorant assurances of their perfection.

How little she had known of the world then! She thought she knew a great deal now, and kneeling very humbly by the narrow bedstead, prayed God not to allow her experiences of grandeur or luxury to make her proud, or dis-

dainful of the lowly roof which had sheltered her childhood.

To that prayer she added her passionate entreaties for her brother's safe and speedy return.

How often she had knelt beside that bed, sobbing and praying, through the dark days of the South African War. And here was Louis going blithely forth to fresh danger. She thought of his words :

"God has been very good to me. Why should this luck come to me, when every fellow out here would give anything to go?"

"Why, indeed?" thought Jeanne, ruefully.

As she blew out the candle and laid her brown head on the small, hard pillow, she shivered a little, for, though the weather was surprisingly mild for the end of January, yet the fireless attic was a great deal colder in this fresh atmosphere, than her luxurious bedroom in Grosvenor Square.

The forlorn sense of being again alien to her surroundings returned upon her in the darkness.

She was fond of Uncle Roberts, but she had nothing in common with him, and had talked more to Aunt Caroline in a few hours than to her uncle in her whole life time. Why, indeed, had she not talked less and listened more? she thought remorsefully.

Cousin Denis was even more companionable than Aunt Caroline, partly because he inspired

her, in spite of his dukedom, with less awe, partly because he was of her own generation.

Was it because the descendant of the de Coursets had more natural affinity with these fine people than with the sturdy, honest farmer to whom she had been all her life indebted for her daily bread? Jeanne hoped earnestly that her feelings held nothing of ingratitude.

With all her might she respected Uncle Roberts; respected him in spite of his oddity, his silence, his fiery bristling unkempt hair and beard, his lengthy expositions of the Scriptures, his contempt for everything he did not understand; and all these things had been sore trials in their time to Louis and herself.

She respected his independence, his piety, his industry, his solid, stolid kindness of heart, his stern uprightness.

Yet now that she had seen him again she wondered how she had thought it possible to ask his advice.

When had she or Louis asked counsel of Uncle Roberts?

It had never occurred to either of them, in their confident youth, and with their consciousness of a superior education, but that they must know better than he.

"Still—I will ask him; for there is nobody else," Jeanne finally decided, after an hour's wakefulness, and anxious pondering over the situation;

but her mind was filled with misgivings as she fell asleep.

In the early morning, waking to sunshine, she forgot all her troubles and went out rejoicing.

She climbed the rocky grass slopes above Coed-Ithel, among the dead bracken, to the source of the mountain torrent that supplied the farm with water, finding its way thence to the great river which ran through the valley below; there had been heavy rains, and the stream was doubled in volume, rushing loudly over the moss-grown rocks which impeded its course, and foaming and seething round every obstacle.

Though the sky was of a brilliant blue, the sun, newly risen over the opposite mountain, was hidden by a wandering army of purple clouds; which, passing over the valley, cast its deep shadow on the brown hillsides.

The song of the birds, deceived by the unseasonable mildness into the belief that spring was closer at hand, resounded far and near.

Just below her glistened the slab-tiled roof of the farm, and its outhouses, also built and roofed with grey stone, and held together by hundred-year-old stems of giant ivy, which like a thousand hairy snakes coiled about them, holding aloft a heavy weight of luxuriant polished foliage above the reach of the farmer's shears.

She looked down upon the farm, which appeared

very small and solitary, standing in the bare orchard; and a long way farther down yet, into the valley below.

The distant saw-mill's steady hum came clearly to her ear through the still air; not a breath stirred; and from the little white homes dotted over the opposite mountain side, the thin blue smoke shot steadily upwards against the leafless trees.

What sound more cheerful than the rushing of the mountain stream, through this country of ivy-grown, moss-covered stone walls and crumbling ruins; of wild bracken, royal fern, and red soil; of emerald mistletoe crowning gnarled and lichened apple trees; of solemn, giant firs, and sombre, twisted, aged yews?

As Jeanne climbed the mountain path, and turned to look yet again upon the wide stretch of cultivated country below, the sun flooded the valley, and the purple shadows of the cloud fled across the hills and vanished; leaving brown wood, green field, and wet glistening roads alike gilded with the brightness of the morning glory.

It caught the brown river, bubbling over the weirs, and turned the sparkling ripples to flashing diamonds; it caught the red-brown plough-land, the red-brown brushwood, and the red-brown fern dying on the hills,—and their ruddiness grew transparent as fire. It caught the smoke

from the mop-stick factory in the village, and turned it into wreaths of floating silver.

Jeanne thought of the London fog, and stretched her arms above her head, and laughed aloud for gladness as she ran down the hill again, and entered the bare orchard where sheets and sheets of snowdrops, with their white and green bells, were drooping in the sunshine, the only flower visible save a solitary aconite or so in the garden, and the burden of yellow, scentless, winter jasmine nailed against the wall.

"Have ye gone clean daft, Jenny?" said Uncle Roberts, regarding her with amaze, as she dropped on her knees in the wet grass to gather the snowdrops. "One would think ye'd never seen the place before."

"I have never missed it before," Jeanne said. "Oh, Uncle Roberts, I want to ask your advice—if you could spare a moment to talk to me." She was surprised at her own boldness.

"D'ye think I've time to stand talking this hour of the day?" said Uncle Roberts; and he refused to take his eyes off John Evans, who was unloading the split trunks of dead apple trees from the cart, and carrying them in to the woodshed.

After supper that evening the farmer proved more amenable.

Jeanne fetched him his pipe, and filled it for him, and gave Granny Morgan a look which was a preconcerted signal between them, and the old woman slipped up-stairs, nothing loth, to her well-earned slumbers.

Jeanne brought her wooden stool and sat at her uncle's knee, as though she were a little girl again; but now she felt much older and wiser and more experienced than he, even though she was about to ask his advice.

He glanced down upon her little bent brown head, and the glance was not untender; in fact it was as near a caress as a glance could be; but Jeanne did not see it, and it did not trouble Uncle Roberts in the least that she should not know how kindly he thought of her; probably he thought it would have been bad for her to learn the extent of his fatherly affection for her and her brother.

Then he smoked in peace, and had Jeanne not made haste to break the silence, he would have fallen asleep, as he usually did after supper, taking a nap in his arm-chair as a kind of preliminary canter before going to bed.

"Uncle Roberts, you used to say you meant to go to London some day to see all the sights."

"Aye," said Uncle Roberts, very placidly, "so I do."

"Could n't you come now?"

"What?"

"Couldn't you come now, at once? It seems

to me it would be a very good time to come. Since Aunt Caroline's death," hinted Jeanne delicately, "life seems to me to have grown so very uncertain."

Uncle Roberts, with some uneasiness, assured her that he felt as well as ever he did in his life, and she hastened to apologise.

"I was not exactly thinking of *that*. But there I am, Uncle Roberts—all alone in that big house."

"I thought you said there was fifteen servants."

"I mean—not counting the servants."

"Jenny," said Uncle Roberts, "never let me hear you say you don't count servants. Ain't they flesh and blood the same as you be? This is what comes of riches. Flesh and blood is nothing. Fellow-creatures is nothing."

"Oh, Uncle, indeed you misunderstand. They are very far from being nothing. It is I who am nobody in the house, and if anything, frightened to death of them all."

"Do you mean they put upon you?" said Uncle Roberts, preparing to get angry with his fellow-creatures.

"No, no; they mean very kindly! But you see, even if I *wanted* to be friendly with them, they would keep themselves to themselves. They pride themselves on knowing their places, and try as you will—so far would they go, and no farther."

"Quite right too," said Uncle Roberts, approv-

ingly. Platitudes always appealed to him, especially if they sounded at all Scriptural, whatever their sense.

"If you came up," said Jeanne, "you would sit in the parlour with me," she was obliged to use a word within the scope of Uncle Roberts's imagination. The drawing-room might have aroused his contempt; and the morning-room would have suggested a separate apartment for each portion of the day, and excited his ridicule.

"What should I do there?" said Uncle Roberts.

"Why—" said Jeanne, and stopped short. After all, what would Uncle Roberts do in the morning-room where she found next to nothing to do herself, in spite of her education, her love of dreaming, and her letters to and from Louis?

Uncle Roberts in his old coat, and carpet slippers, looked very comfortable and good-natured, as he leant back in the patchwork covered arm-chair, and smoked his cherry-wood pipe.

"There is a large comfortable room, with big leather arm-chairs, behind the dining-room," she said, unconsciously thinking aloud; "the walls are lined with book-cases. You could smoke there—for it is called the smoking-room. And we need n't be indoors all the time, for we could go and see the sights."

"I think I see myself," said Uncle Roberts, taking his pipe out of his mouth after a long pause,

"going to see the sights in February, and the lambing coming on."

"I forgot the lambing," said Jeanne.

A dismayed silence ensued.

"When I talked of going to London—but I done for sixty year without going a nigh the place—" said Uncle Roberts unusually loquacious, "I was thinking of taking you both, boy and girl, along with me. I guess I'll wait now till Louis comes home."

"But what am I to do?" said Jeanne.

"Your dooty," said Uncle Roberts.

He smoked for quite five minutes without a word, to let this recommendation sink into Jeanne's understanding.

"You wrote me, awhile back, when your aunt was took, poor soul, (ready or unready, I be'd sorry to say which, nor it ain't for any one to say), you wrote me as you'd settled with her man of business that 't was your dooty to stop and take care of Louis's house and furniture for him."

"Yes, I did," said Jeanne.

"And I sent you a post card—not being so ready with my pen, nor so free with my stamps, as some," said Uncle Roberts, pointedly, "and I said, 'Dear Jenny, so be it,' or words to that effect."

"Yes," said Jeanne, and she stifled an hysterical laugh.

"If 't was your dooty to stop then, 't is your

dooty to stop now," said Uncle Roberts, decidedly.

"But if people call on me—"

"Well, what harm can they do?"

"A—a cousin of Miss Marney's has called upon me," faltered Jeanne, "and Dunham, my aunt's maid, thinks he ought not to come because I'm alone. He has only been once. But he—he might come again."

"Ain't he respectable?"

Jeanne hesitated imperceptibly.

She felt that if she mentioned that Miss Marney's cousin was a duke, her Uncle Roberts might once and for all, declare that his respectability was very improbable. With burning cheeks and downcast eyes, she suppressed the dukedom.

"He is *most* respectable," she said firmly. "A very quiet young man,—and—and *lame*."

"Does she think I haven't brought you up to know how to take care of yourself—" he said, with rising wrath, "the best-educated, best-behaved girl in the parish,—that you can't be trusted to have a young man call on you, with fifteen respectable old family servants in the house, at your back?"

"I daresay it's just because she's an old maid and has old-fashioned ideas," said Jeanne, soothingly.

"So have I old-fashioned ideas. But I never heard that a respectable young man could n't call on a respectable young woman, nor I don't

hold with such notions at all. This is what comes of living in rich men's houses; imputing evil where none exists."

"If *you* did n't think it wrong, Uncle Roberts, and as he's a cousin of Aunt Caroline's, I would like to see him now and then,—that is, if he ever does come again—for I find London very lonely. It is a very dull place."

Uncle Roberts considered. A quiet, lame young man did not sound very dangerous, and Jeanne was a steady, sensible girl. Also he was indignant that Miss Marney's servants should venture to criticise his niece.

"I can't see no harm in your seeing him now and again, Dunham or no Dunham," he said, obstinately.

CHAPTER X

CECILIA

So Jeanne found herself once more alone in the Grosvenor Square house; but this time fortified by her Uncle Roberts's opinion that here, and here only, lay her duty towards her brother.

As she entered the hall, she was surprised to find that, again, she experienced not a little of the pleasant sensation of home-coming.

She opened the door of the morning-room, and looked quite affectionately at the familiar furniture. After all, how pretty and luxurious it now appeared to her.

Even though she might consider it far more delightful and interesting to pluck a handful of snowdrops, fresh from the wet earth, for herself, yet she could not refuse to acknowledge the loveliness of the forced spring flowers which filled every corner of the morning-room.

Jeanne was too inexperienced to be aware of the cost of those flowers. The florist's bill was presented quarterly, and as it had been agreed that the accustomed ways of the household should

be continued without change until Louis's return, no check had been placed upon Hewitt's taste for decoration.

The great, pale, waxen bells of hyacinths in gilt buckets filled the room with an almost overpowering sweetness. Daffodils and yellow tulips shone like sunshine in dark corners; a sheaf of lilies of the valley was set beside the Book of Beauty and the silver bowl was filled with large, double, Parma violets.

"It is like spring come indoors!" cried Jeanne, with a long breath of delight.

"I am very glad you are pleased with it, ma'am," said Hewitt, with almost a gardener's pride—for had he not set the flowers in their places with his own hands? "A card has been left for you, ma'am, during your absence," and he presented, decorously, a small, solitary pasteboard in the midst of a large salver.

On the card was inscribed the name of the Duchess of Monaghan, and above the name was scribbled in a very illegible handwriting,

Wednesday, 4.30. Music. Very small.

Jeanne was obliged to apply to Dunham for the meaning of this mysterious communication.

"It means her Grace will be at home on Wednesday, ma'am, to be sure," said Dunham—her sallow wrinkled face grew quite pink with

excitement—"and she hopes you will come at 4.30, and there 'll be music going on."

"Do you mean she will be giving a party?"

"If it was a *party*, ma'am, it's not very likely she would ask you, with your poor aunt not two months in her grave."

"I would not like to show any disrespect to Aunt Caroline. I will write and explain," said Jeanne.

Dunham instantly relented and took the opposite view.

"It is n't likely the Duchess would wish to shew disrespect either, Miss Jane, you may be very sure of that. You see how careful she has been to write, "Very small." That means there's but a few invited; not half London crowding to her house as she'd have if she was giving a real party. Being a relation and nothing formal about the invitation, I don't say you might n't go. I'm sure my poor lady would have liked to think they remembered the connection however late in the day."

"I wish I had been at home when she called; I could have asked her all about it," said Jeanne, regretfully.

"Bless me, ma'am, you don't think she asked for you!" said Dunham, reproachfully. "The footman just handed in the card. But she was in the carriage, for I saw her myself from the window. 'T is a great compliment her coming

at all. You being but young, as one might say, and her such a great lady, and the penny post so handy for invitations. Depend upon it, she repents not having shown more civility to my poor lady while she could, and is trying to make up for it. But to ask to come in on a first visit! I don't know, to be sure, what may be the fashion nowadays; but in my poor lady's time she would never have dreamt of anything but leaving her card at the door for that," said Dunham, tossing her head.

"Wednesday, and this is only Friday. What a long time to wait," said Jeanne, excitedly. "However, it will be something to look forward to. And, Mrs. Dunham, I—I asked Uncle Roberts if it would matter very much if—if my cousin—I mean the Duke—called upon me now and then, whilst I was here alone—and he said he could not see any harm at all in it."

"No more can I, ma'am, now his mamma have been," said Dunham, with great dignity. "It just makes all the difference in the world, as I told you, Miss Jane, if you remember. I'm sure his Grace can't call at this house too often to please me. I'm only sorry he didn't think to come a little sooner, when your poor auntie was alive to hear of it."

Jeanne could not help feeling, that Dunham, as usual, had got the better of her, in her small attempt at self-assertion.

On the morrow the current of her thoughts was changed by the appearance of a paragraph in the *Morning Post* to the effect that Mr. and Mrs. Hogg-Watson had returned from their travels in South America, to their house in Queen's Gate.

"This time there cannot be any mistake in my going to call," Jeanne said to herself, with not a little pleasurable excitement. "If I know anybody in this world it is Cecilia! And there *could* not be two couples with such a name as Hogg-Watson travelling in South America at the same time. And after all, though Cecilia and I had our quarrels, we had a good deal of fun together too. She has probably improved in all sorts of ways since she married; she can't be spoilt like she used to be. And I long to see her children. I can ask them all to come and see me. How delightful and cheerful it will be."

She drove across the Park to Queen's Gate that very afternoon, without waiting for Sunday to intervene that Cecilia might get settled.

Mrs. Hogg-Watson was at home; and a very smart parlour-maid conducted Jeanne up-stairs, and into a large empty drawing-room.

Jeanne looked round her, and decided that the apartment bore the strong impress of her friend's personality.

Cecilia was fair, and her favourite colour in her girlhood had been blue. Consequently the

room was almost dazzling in its variety of azure tints.

The walls and carpet and curtains were blue; the furniture was covered with blue brocade; and the water colour drawings which were hung upon the walls appeared to have been selected solely for the hue of the sea and sky, which predominated therein.

All the cushions wore white muslin covers tied up with blue sash ribbons, and the writing table appointments were of blue morocco.

"I suppose Cecilia will wear a blue dress. I wonder why she is so long," thought Jeanne, after a few minutes' patient waiting. "I am sure she will never guess who it is; for though I said my name three times, I saw the maid had not the least idea what it was."

When Cecilia at length came into the room, however, rather breathless and apologetic,—with the air of one who has just completed a hasty toilette,—she was not wearing blue, but a fawn-coloured gown of a very elegant Parisian make, closely fitting her tall, full figure, which had amplified since her girlhood.

But her charms, though somewhat full-blown, were still considerable; and in spite of a double chin, she possessed every claim to be considered a handsome woman that could be set forth by a white skin, healthy colouring, abundant, fair hair, and fine proportions.

Perhaps it was Jeanne's fancy, that on perceiving who it was, Cecilia drew back momentarily, and dropped some of the *empressement* with which she had been prepared to greet her visitor.

"Good gracious, I had no idea it was you, Jenny," she said. "Fancy *your* being in London. What are you doing here, pray?"

She kissed her erstwhile playmate in rather a perfunctory and affected manner; and Jeanne's easily disturbed colour rose.

When, in the candid days of childhood, Jeanne and Cecilia had disagreed—which was not seldom, and would have been oftener but for the yielding disposition of the younger—they had called each other Jenny and Cissie. At other times they had been always Jeanne and Cecilia; thus, by mutual consent, solacing each other's wounded dignity, by ignoring the detested nicknames bestowed by homely and undiscerning parents and guardians.

Jeanne, though meek, was yet but mortal woman, and she returned Cecilia's greeting with spirit.

"I am in London because I live in London; and I came to visit you, *Cissie*, because I saw you had just arrived."

Cecilia executed a well-acted little start of surprise at the sound of her abbreviated Christian name; but Jeanne's determined bearing did not

relax in the slightest degree, though inwardly she was conscious of a disgraceful inclination to shed tears.

"We have been absent from home a long time; travelling in South America," said Cecilia, with elaborate politeness.

"So I saw in the papers," said Jeanne, with equally defiant formality.

There came a feeble rattle at the door handle.

Jeanne looked at Cecilia with a sudden interest she could not help, and Cecilia thawed a very little.

"Open the door," said a child's voice without.

"It is Joey. How very naughty! The children are never allowed in the drawing-room without being sent for," said Mrs. Hogg-Watson, affectedly. But she rustled across the blue carpet to open the door.

Jeanne rose too, in her excitement. Fancy Cecilia with children of her own! She almost forgot the frigidity of her old friend's reception in her desire to behold Joey.

"Oh, let me see him," she cried.

"I dress him rather quaintly. He is number four. I have seven altogether, is n't it awful—in nine years?" said Cecilia languidly. "I lost one—pneumonia. You see he is dressed as Bubbles, after Millais's picture."

The back view of Bubbles was distinctly captivating; there was the little green suit and

frill, and Joey's large mop of flaxen curls crowned his shrimp-like body. 'But when he removed his head from his mother's skirt to look at the visitor, alas! the face was the face of Mr. Hogg-Watson, and anything less like the face of Bubbles could hardly be conceived.

"He has beautiful hair," said Jeanne.

"Hush, he will hear, and I don't want him to be made vain," said Cecilia, without looking at her.

"Where have you been walking, Joey?"

"In Tensington Gardens," said Joey.

"Did Nana leave that note for Mammy?"

"Yes, Nana did leave it."

"What are you trying to get away for?"

"I want to tee the tarriage," said Joey, struggling from his parent's embraces, and escaping to the window, whither Cecilia pursued him.

During this conversation Mrs. Hogg-Watson devoted both her eyes and her attention exclusively to her son, whilst her visitor sat apart, embarrassed and neglected, on the sofa; to which she had returned on finding her overtures to Joey repulsed. Whence this newly acquired absence of mind, and affectation of languor on the part of Cecilia, who had always been rather brisk and decided, even sharp, in speech and manner?

Was it the result of marriage, or merely assumed to overawe her humble friend? Cecilia had

never been very sympathetic, Jeanne remembered, but at least she had been *real*, and even full of vitality.

Her disappointment was keen, but her heart was too tender to give up all her hopes of friendship in a moment, and she took the unwise course of reminding Cecilia of that humble past, which Mrs. Hogg-Watson greatly preferred to ignore.

"I have just been down to Pen-y-waun, Cecilia," she said, wistfully. "But the Rectory was shut up, as of course you know. Mr. Jones of Tref-goch takes the duties. It's ages since you've been there, is n't it? The old garden looks exactly the same, and the swing is still up where we used to play. And when I saw your name in the paper I was so glad, for it seemed to make London less empty all of a sudden."

"London empty!" said Cecilia, with a shrill laugh, "I have scarcely a moment to myself, even at this time of the year."

"I suppose *you* have a great many friends," said Jeanne, with a sigh.

"Heaps—of a kind—acquaintances and so forth," said Cecilia vaguely. "But they come and go—" she added in a hurry, as though she were afraid that her old friend was about to ask her for introductions to this wide evanescent circle.

She affected once more to be absorbed in her son.

"Come away, Joey, and don't flatten 'oo little nose against the window-pane any more. Won't 'oo tum to 'oo mammy like a dood boy?"

Jeanne's rising tears were dried by the scorn which all honest natures, however gentle, feel for affectation.

She began to button her little black cloth jacket,—which she had opened on account of the heat of the unscreened fire,—preparatory to rising.

"If she can't be natural, I won't stop and make ridiculous conversation with her," she thought, and her face burnt with indignation.

"Dere's de tarriage," said Joey, ignoring his parent's blandishments.

"What carriage?"

"Mine," said Jeanne, in a trembling voice, and she rose from the sofa.

"Yours! What do you mean?" said Cecilia in her natural tones of alert curiosity. "Who drove you here?"

"My coachman," said Jeanne, with a dignity belied by her beating heart.

Jenny to be going about in a large double brougham, drawn by a pair of fat grey horses, and driven by her own coachman!

Cecilia was astounded.

"Are you married?" she cried, with a gasp. It appeared to her the only possible solution.

"No, I am not married, and the carriage belongs

to Louis," said Jeanne, repenting of her unwonted assumption of a magnificence not truly her own.

"Louis!"

If Cecilia wished to hear more, she must swallow all pretence to indifference, and ask questions. This was Jeanne's revenge for the coolness of her reception.

Mrs. Hogg-Watson's curiosity easily overcame her exclusiveness.

"Run away to the nursery directly, Joey. You are crumpling the curtains, you naughty child. Go at once," she said, in a voice which Bubbles apparently recognised as one to be feared and obeyed, for he trotted obediently out of the room, leaving the door open, which his mother shut behind him.

"You are not going yet, Jeanne? Oh, I see, the fire is scorching you; let me put this screen. Sit down again for heaven's sake, and tell me about Louis. Is he in London?"

"No, he is in Somaliland, or on the way," said Jeanne, "and I am taking care of his house, which was left to him last December by my great-aunt, Miss Marney of Orsett."

"I'm sure I never heard of her," said Cecilia, staring.

"No, we never thought about her. Uncle Roberts knew she was alive, but he did not even know where she lived, till she sent for me; and

then she died; and so here I am, all alone, at 99 Grosvenor Square."

"Grosvenor Square!" cried Cecilia, gasping once more.

"It's not one of the largest houses," said Jeanne, apologetically. "Mrs. Dunham says they differ very much. But it seems like a palace to me, of course."

"*Grosvenor Square!* Do you mean round a corner, in a side street?" said Cecilia, suspiciously.

"No, I do not. It is *in* Grosvenor Square."

"But then—your aunt must have been very rich."

"Yes, she was very rich, and she has left everything she had in the world to Louis."

"And nothing to you."

"It is the same thing," said Jeanne.

"My dear! It's nothing of the kind. If you were married you'd find that out quickly enough! Now how *like* Mamma—who wrote only a few weeks ago, on a post card, and said you had gone to London—not even to mention it was Grosvenor Square!" said Cecilia indignantly. "Of course I thought you had just gone up for a treat. She merely put a P. S. 'Jenny going to London.' I suppose you know Mamma and I have a coolness? We quarrelled outright six months ago, and I decided not to answer her letters at all till she had calmed down. So she seldom writes now."

Jeanne's discretion was outweighed by her pity for Mrs. Davies.

"Oh, Cissie," she said, "you have almost broken her heart."

Cecilia could bear home-truths without wincing,—from people who lived in Grosvenor Square.

"It's all very well, Jeanne," she said, in deprecating tones, "but you've no idea what it is to be married, and your people expecting you to go on just the same as though you were a little girl at home, and write to them everything that happens, about twice a week. Actually on my honeymoon Mamma wrote to me every day, and expected me to answer her letters! Not but what I had more time then than I have ever had since, for Joseph went roaming round moping old picture-galleries from morning till night, and nearly drove me mad till I hit on the excellent plan of saying it gave me neuralgia, and let him go by himself. Why can't Mamma console herself with Tom or Jim? they would be only too glad; but no, she must run after me because I am the only girl, though she has two sons. I suppose she has cried over my heartlessness to you many a time, and said I put nothing in my letters when I did write?"

"Oh, Cecilia, would she be likely to give you away like that to *me*!"

"Well—I did n't put much," admitted Cecilia.
"How could I? Living in another world as I

do, and Mamma not knowing any of my friends? What was there to say?"

"There were the children."

"Oh, the children. The way people go on about them. I'm sure I'm a good mother if ever there was one. I try to make pictures of them. What clothes and hair will do *is* done. But it's a little hard on me that they are all Hogg-Watsons. You remember what a pretty child I used to be," said Cecilia, modestly. "But really otherwise I have little to do with them. Joseph is a great authority on education and health; and Mamma's old-fashioned ways would not suit him at all. I should be obliged to keep them apart if only for that. Imagine, he chooses their nurses and governesses,—all German—and even their toys and pictures, and diet lists. Luckily such things don't interest me, or I should have rebelled long ago. But think of Mamma interfering! You remember the ridiculous way she used to dose us with her patent medicines; and I am sure we learnt nothing at all with the prim old governess she thought so much of."

"We did not learn much," Jeanne was obliged to admit.

"I feel the defects of my early education terribly, I can assure you, now that I am married to a celebrity," said Cecilia.

"Is he a celebrity?"

"My dear! Crowned heads visit him!" said

Cecilia, reproachfully. "He is known all over Europe and America; and his scientific books are standard works. But I suppose they think nothing of that in Pen-y-waun and Coed-Ithel. Though to be sure, I am obliged to be very careful what I let out to Mamma about who comes here, or she would expect to be asked to meet them on the spot, a thing I scarcely expect myself. I assure you people are most jealous and disagreeable. They think nothing of asking Joseph to their houses and ignoring my existence altogether."

"And does he go?" said Jeanne.

"Well, sometimes I am bound to say that he does," said Cecilia candidly. "Though it makes very little difference to me," she added pathetically, "for when he stays at home he is so absorbed in his work that I scarcely see him."

"What is his work?"

"Don't ask me," said Cecilia, shuddering. "He calls himself a bacteriologist, and dreadful things of that kind, which I don't even pretend to be able to pronounce. Chiefly dissecting germs and microbes, so far as I know. He never speaks of anything connected with his work to me, and he has forbidden me to speak of it to him. You know how cranky these professors are. He is a professor of chemistry and all sorts of things, you know; and a member of scientific academies in Rome and Philadelphia and Berlin and heaven

knows where. I often tell him he forgets he has a wife at all. Think of dragging me all over South America collecting mosquitoes, and then coming home in February of all times."

"Did you take the children?"

"Good heavens, no, we were uncomfortable enough without that. As far as that goes, he wanted to leave me with them. But I insisted on going with him, and for once I got my way. Jeanne! stop and have tea with me, and you will see him. He condescends to come in for a cup of tea, sometimes, though he hates this room simply because it is done up according to *my* taste."

"But I saw him at your wedding. Still—it was only for a moment, and I don't think I should recognise him," said Jeanne.

"It is so long ago—nine years," sighed Cecilia. "You must be getting on, Jeanne; and yet, I declare you look as childish as ever. I wonder you never married. Do you mean to say there has been *no one*—absolutely no one?"

"No one at all," said Jeanne, blushing.

"Not in all these years."

"There is Louis. He has been enough for me. We are too fond of each other, I suppose, to think about falling in love."

"Oh, my dear,—ridiculous! Brothers and sisters are all very well, but they are not everything. Well, you surprise me, for I always thought you pretty—in your dark sort of way, you know.

But perhaps now you are up here, we shall see! How you blush! Does that mean you have some one in your eye?"

"I have no one in my eye," said Jeanne, almost angrily. "Oh, Cecilia, do not talk about it, please."

"You are surely not going to be coy!" said Cecilia, severely. "At your age, Jeanne, it would be a pity if you could not talk things over sensibly. Why, at twenty-five I was the mother of six already, and a seventh—but no matter. So you have not even had a chance to get married! Though to be sure who is there to marry at Penny-waun? It was a miracle Joseph turning up. I shall never forget my first view of him; at the archæological picnic at Tref-goch. (Archæology is his recreation, his *recreation* if you will believe me!) He went poking about the ruins in spectacles, and gave a lecture afterwards; and I didn't understand a single word of it, and thought what a dull creature he was."

"And yet you married him in a month!"

"My dear, anybody would have married Joseph if he'd wanted to make them. He's one of those ugly powerful men who fascinate women," said Cecilia solemnly. "Nobody can say I have a jealous disposition, but if you could see how they run after him still! I only wish they could see him at home in some of his moods. I assure you, Jeanne, he is absolutely violent when he is an-

noyed, and I verily believe he has the worst temper in the world."

Jeanne, somewhat shocked and distressed by such revelations, sought in vain for words to convey her sympathy as delicately as possible to this much-enduring wife; but she was relieved of her difficulty by Cecilia's calmly proceeding to add:

"Not but what I rather like a man with a bad temper, myself. Well—to return to that picnic; there were half a dozen women there, trying their best to attract him by jabbering science to him. If they had but known how he hated it! If there is any jabbering of that kind to be done, he naturally likes to do it himself. He determined to marry me the instant he set eyes on me. He has a weakness for fair complexions. You see what a wreck mine is now. But what can you expect? Seven children in nine years," she repeated mournfully.

"I think, Cecilia, if you ask me, that you are much better looking than you used to be," said Jeanne, consolingly, "and you know you were always pretty. Of course you are a little plumper. But not more than is becoming."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you to say so," said Cecilia, in pleased and softened tones. "Of course I have every advantage of dress now to set me off. I will say Joseph does n't grudge me that," and she glanced with some complacency

at her own reflection in the pier glass opposite the sofa. "Well Jeanne, we were always friends, you know, off and on—and if I was a little—reserved when you first came in, I hope you will put it down to—" she paused imperceptibly—"to my thinking you were on Mamma's side, and all that, and come to reproach me, as the Pen-y-waun neighbours do whenever we meet. As though a celebrity's wife, in another sphere—*could* keep up with them all."

Jeanne accepted her friend's apologies very willingly; and if any doubts of Cecilia's sincerity still lurked in her heart, did her best to suppress them. She was at once too lonely and too generous to desire any quarrel with her first friend. Even if Cecilia were not as disinterested in her affection as could be wished, it must still be more lively to sit and talk with her, than to mope in solitary silence at home.

"So your aunt left you no money. I must say that was a great shame," said Cecilia, warmly. "What will become of you when Louis marries? So good-looking as he used to be, he is certain to marry now. Why, even in the old days I used to think—if he had n't been younger than I—"

"He never showed the slightest inclination to marry anybody," said Jeanne, jealously.

"Not to you, I daresay," said Cecilia, shrewdly. "One's brothers don't tell one everything."

"My brother does," said Jeanne.

"Oh, my dear! So you think! But one never can tell with one's brothers. Look at Tom. What a creature he has married. I never see him now."

"Louis is very unlike Tom."

"Men are all alike in some ways, my dear," said Cecilia, with the pitying superiority of the married woman talking to the spinster. "Of course Louis will marry now that he is rich. Surely you could not be so selfish as to wish him not to?"

"Some day, of course," said Jeanne. "I want him to marry. But he promised me faithfully, long ago, that he would never marry any one I did n't like—so it will be all right, and I shan't mind—when the time comes. Still I may hope, without being selfish, that it won't come just yet. He has his career to think about first."

"I don't see how one can expect to like one's brothers' wives," said Cecilia. "They always marry some horrid woman or other. Men are so easily taken in. Joseph's sisters can't bear me, and I never even troubled to be civil to them, knowing very well that it would be no use. He goes to see his people by himself, and as they are all scientific together, I'm sure it's no loss."

"But you'll come and see *me*," entreated Jeanne.

"Certainly I will," said Cecilia. "I can assure you I know very well what it is to be alone.

Joseph goes to the most outlandish places, and if he can slip off without me, he will. Imagine, at his age, going out to South Africa."

"To fight!"

"No—no, not to fight—he was a surgeon in his youth and thought he could be of use. Of course nobody wanted him. I felt sure of that. He was much too old. But that is Joseph all over. If he has made up his mind to do a thing, he does it. So off he went in spite of all I could say; though he was quite violent when I suggested I might go with him and nurse some of the officers. My heart goes out to the wounded men. But you will be wanting to go shopping, Jeanne, and I really might help you over that—" she cast an expressive glance at Jeanne's plain dress. "I can show you where to buy all the nicest clothes; and you can't be wearing mourning much longer, just for a great-aunt."

"Indeed—I want to show every respect in my power, to poor Aunt Caroline. It is the least I can do," said Jeanne.

"I suppose Louis inheriting her money *does* make a difference," said Cecilia, calmly.

Jeanne gave up all attempts to explain that the fortune had nothing to do with it.

There were some things Cecilia had never been able to understand.

One was Jeanne's reverence for her French descent; which Cecilia had always honestly

deplored; and they had once called each other Jenny and Cissie for a week because she had casually remarked there was generally something rather fishy about foreign blood.

Louis had finally forbidden his sister to mention the sacred subject of the *ancienne noblesse* at the Rectory, and she implicitly obeyed his orders; the cause of this particular quarrel was eventually almost forgotten.

"I will go shopping with you, or do anything you like," said Jeanne, happily, "and I hope you will come to me as soon as possible, for I long to show you the house."

"Let me just take a squint at my engagement book, and we'll settle it at once," said Cecilia, importantly. "And let me see—how tiresome of Joseph; I want you to know him so much and he does not seem inclined to come in; they must have told him I had a visitor. How would it be if I brought him to dine with you one night, quite quietly, you know, only our three selves—in Grosvenor Square?"

"It would be very kind of you indeed," said the lonely lady, gratefully.

CHAPTER XI

THE CONCERT

ON Wednesday afternoon Jeanne drove round the Park as usual, until it was time for the Duchess to be At Home.

The weather had become suddenly and severely cold, so that the place looked almost deserted.

The icy breath of the east wind swayed the topmost branches of the bare black trees; the benches on the frost-bitten paths were whitened over; the drooping shrubs hung their shrivelled leaves, and the scanty grass was hard and crystallized.

The children of the poor remained prudently away; and only the children of the upper classes were sent forth as usual, to brave the bitter cold; with purple cheeks and little scarlet noses they trotted along, wrapped in cloth and velvet; sometimes gaitered, sometimes with bare little blue legs that had some ado to keep pace with hurrying nurses and governesses.

Jeanne, in the comfortable close carriage, shivered in spite of black fox rug and carpeted foot-warmer; and in spite of the excitement of

anticipation which made her cheeks burn. But Buckam and William on the box, each burying a scornful nose in the depths of his broad fur tippet, appeared unconscious of the inclemency of the weather.

Frost is pleasant enough when the sun shines brightly over snowy land and glistening bough, but Jeanne found it depressing indeed in this grey chill atmosphere, with a heavy pall of yellow fog visibly suspended above; grimly waiting to descend upon London the moment the east wind should cease whistling among the chimney-pots, and sink to frozen sleep.

A long line of carriages was slowly passing before the front door of the Duchess of Monaghan's house in Park Lane, and Miss Marney's brougham took its place in the rank, with its frightened occupant; who descended in her turn, and went into the warm and brightly lighted hall, and up the staircase, which was thronged but not crowded, with a goodly number of ladies and a very few gentlemen.

Among the velvets and silks and sables surrounding her, Jeanne in her plain black jacket and crape *toque* looked, as she was, a little alien to fashion; and began to wonder, rather miserably and nervously, why she had come at all, as she looked round her in vain for a friendly face.

But her name—or the garbled version of it

which must pass muster when a foreign appellation is in question—was announced with the others, and she found herself shaking hands with her hostess in her turn.

Her awe of the Duchess amounted to terror, but her alarm was wasted; the Duchess smiled at everybody and recognised nobody, for she was short-sighted to blindness, and her glasses, without which she was helpless, had become entangled in the ruffles of her Mechlin *fichu*.

Jeanne had, happily, no time to utter the greetings and explanations which she had composed and rehearsed in the carriage, before finding herself seated on a little gilt chair in a row of other little gilt chairs, and behind several large picture hats, through the chinks of which she ventured to peep; and beheld a grand piano, a group of palms, and a gentleman with long hair clasping a violoncello.

Where was the Duke? Where, oh, where was kind Cousin Denis?

Regardless of the fact that the hats and bonnets around her were stationary, Jeanne's little black *toque* bobbed up and down in the hope of discovering him.

Her efforts were presently rewarded, and she beheld him,—though in the surrounding hum of conversation she could not hear him—politely conversing with another long-haired gentleman who was preparing to take his place at the piano.

As she looked, there jumped up and spoke to the Duke a young man so like him in face and colouring that Jeanne concluded it must be his brother. A tall, broad-shouldered young man, with the same fair hair and straight features, but as burly in figure and florid of colouring as Cousin Denis was slight and pale.

Jeanne suddenly realised, as the brothers stood side by side, what the Duke ought to have been like had it not been for the accident which had spoilt his life.

It *must* be his brother, she thought, and in the warmth of her heart she addressed an interested enquiry on the subject to the lady who occupied the little gilt chair next to her own, on the left.

The lady—having paused to overcome her dismayed surprise at being addressed at all by a total stranger—answered rather shortly that the young man in question was Lord Dermot Liscarney, and turned her right shoulder to Jeanne as a sign that she was not prepared to continue this illicit intercourse. Thus another lesson found its way home to the timid soul of Jeanne, who knew not that, although in most civilised countries a stranger in a friend's house is the friend of your friend, and consequently your own, at least during your sojourn under the same roof—yet in England a stranger in such circumstances, far from being treated with the extra courtesy due to his solitary position, must be solemnly

and severely ostracised until the magic words of introduction have been spoken.

But Jeanne was as young in spirit as in appearance; and she presently recovered from this rebuff, in the excitement, incidental to rusticity, of beholding a face she recognised in an unknown crowd.

Mrs. Wheler, smarter than ever, was seated at right angles to her in the middle of another row of gilt chairs, and Jeanne could not help bestowing upon her a timid, but friendly glance, which somehow managed to express recognition, greeting, and apology for past errors, in one fleeting smile.

Mrs. Wheler's mechanical head bowed politely, before her dormant intellect had time to grasp the fact that this was a person whom she had no intention of admitting to her acquaintance at all; but Jeanne, happy in the salutation obtained, was spared the contemplation of Mrs. Wheler's after expression, for her attention was attracted elsewhere. The violoncello now began its plaintive song, and the well-bred crowd was instantly hushed into attentive silence.

Jeanne's experience of music had been hitherto confined almost entirely to the efforts of the choir at Pen-y-waun, the harmonium, played with tormenting inaccuracy by Mrs. Davies, and Cecilia's remarkable performances upon the piano-forte; diversified by variations upon the con-

certina executed by John Evans on Saturday nights when Uncle Roberts could be persuaded to put up with the noise.

The brilliant exception to these deplorable experiences had been the visits of a strolling Welsh harpist to her uncle's farm, and the unaccompanied part-singing of the men in the village, whose souls were musical within them, though their voices lacked training, and who consequently sang a great deal better without Mrs. Davies and her harmonium than with them.

Thus the music of Schumann's *Träumerei*, played by a master hand, took Jeanne unawares, and charmed her into an utter forgetfulness of her surroundings, her nervousness, and her isolation in the midst of a crowd.

Breathless and entranced she listened, the tears dropping unheeded from her brown eyes on to the little black gloved hands tightly clasped in her lap.

The great 'cellist, playing his little selection of the *Kinderscenen*, had no such thrilled and absorbed listener, had he known it, as that ignorant country maiden, in all the musical and cultivated audience assembled before him.

When it was over, she came to herself with a start, and dried her tears, and looked anxiously around her, to see if any one had noticed them.

But when the audience had applauded the performer with subdued and regulated enthusiasm,

the hum of conversation was renewed, and Jeanne found she might cry at will, for her neighbours were far too absorbed in each other to observe her.

Impatiently she awaited the next item on the programme. A lady sang three German songs, one after the other, allowing a short pause for encouragement between each; but this time, though the applause was more enthusiastic, Jeanne remained unmoved; neither the voice of the singer, nor the words of a language she did not understand, appealed to her. She became conscious that the room was insufferably hot, in spite of its size; or was it only that she was shaken by her emotion, and needed fresh air to recover herself?

At the end of the third song she heard a voice behind her saying,

"Is the Duke going to play?"

"Oh, I suppose so," was the answer.

"He plays so delightfully."

"Quite charming. But I hope it will be Chopin."

"Oh! he plays his own compositions, sometimes, does n't he? Are n't they good?"

"Excellent! But I prefer Chopin."

A laugh.

Jeanne felt indignant on her cousin's account. Why should Chopin be preferred?

Perhaps she understood presently, when (with quite a glow of cousinly affection and sympathy)

she saw the Duke mounting the low platform, and heard the slight demonstration of polite applause (in which poor Jeanne joined with all her might, indignant it should be no louder) as he took his seat before the piano. The long-haired gentleman shut down the music holder, and propped open the top of the instrument.

The Duke had no affectations and no mannerisms; yet he played brilliantly.

"Chopin," whispered the lady behind Jeanne.

And again Jeanne forgot where she was.

She thought of Louis sailing away over far seas, bound for the desert of Somaliland, full of hope, and youth, and courage; this strange new Louis of the photograph, lean and soldierly in his khaki uniform; grown from a merry boy to strong and serious manhood.

She thought how much she loved him, and of the days when they had climbed the Pen-y-waun hills together to Coed-Ithel, and ridden the cart-horses to water, and hunted in cowsheds, hay-lofts and barns, for hens' eggs; and beaten the orchard trees to shake down the cider apples.

She thought of the first time he had left home, and gone, in the care of the head-master, who knew his history, and had taken a fancy to him, to live at the grammar school at Tref-goch. A little chubby fellow of seven and a half; even then determined to get the best education in his power;

even then master, though he knew it not, of his stubborn uncle's heart.

She remembered that she had walked five of the seven miles to town with the boy and the man, knowing that she must return alone to Coed-Ithel; that the master had chanced to be looking another way when the little boy stood on tiptoe (for Jeanne was taller than her twin until they reached their teens, when he shot up far above her), and put his arms round his sister's neck, and said wistfully "Good-bye, Jenny"; an embrace which took her so by surprise—for Louis was at the age when kisses were displeasing to his manly dignity—that she had hardly responded at the time, though she wept at night afterwards when she recollected it.

The scene came back to her now with a vividness that surprised herself: the long, white road by the river; the little boy with his dusty boots and cherub face; the small figure trotting into the distance by the big man's side; and occasionally turning to flutter a grimy little handkerchief. . . . Louis, bravely trudging into the unknown, with a heart full of courage; and yet always that sweetness of regret for the sister he must leave behind, in that long vanished time, even as now. She was surprised at the force and strength of her imagination—until the Duke's music died away, and her emotions with it; and left her pale and quiet, realising that it was

Chopin, after all, who had inspired and glorified her tender memories of the past.

She wished that the concert might last for ever, and was too much absorbed to notice that here and there were gaps in the audience now, where a few of the guests had melted away during the intervals; their places sometimes being filled by newcomers, and sometimes not.

Thus she did not perceive that the vacant chair on her right had been quietly taken, and she started violently as a voice in low tones addressed her by name.

"How do you do, Cousin Jeanne?" said the Duke.

He saw immediately the traces of tears on her long black lashes, and the perception made his voice especially gentle.

She instinctively lowered her own clear tones to correspond.

"Oh, Cousin Denis, I never heard anything like it. And *you* played Chopin."

"Are you particularly fond of Chopin?"

"I never heard of him. They said it was Chopin. But I shall always like him now. *Like!* What a tame word. I shall always wonder at him, and love him, and reverence him—since he wrote music like that. I even forgot it was you who were playing."

"I am very glad you forget that," he said simply.

"Is it nearly all over?"

"There is an instrumental quartette; and I am afraid that is all."

"Ought I to go?" said Jeanne ingenuously.

"I hope every one will stay for that," said the Duke, politely.

"It was very kind of the Duchess to invite me; do you think I ought to thank her? I am sure it was you who put it into her head."

"She has these little concerts chiefly to please me," said the Duke, "she does not care much for music herself."

"And you—but I need not ask if *you* care—"

"I am afraid I care too much," he said.

"Can one care too much?"

But the quartette began; and he only smiled at her, and said nothing.

She had no opportunity for thanking the Duchess, though she waited timidly for some moments, trying to do so; hovering on the outskirts of the little group who stood talking and laughing round their hostess, and who were evidently intimate friends.

Her cousin Denis waited at the head of the staircase for her, as she made her little efforts to approach his mother; and then smiled and made her a gentle sign, which she instantly obeyed.

She followed the down-stream, and watched his slow progress through the hall, and his courteous response to the greetings and compli-

ments from one and another; then she heard him order a servant close to the hall door to call her carriage; and he came back to her side.

"When may I come and see you again, Cousin Jeanne?" said the Duke.

"Whenever you like," said Jeanne, happy in the recollection of her sensible uncle's permission.

"Then I will come to-morrow," said Cousin Denis, with the little bow that half amused and half embarrassed Jeanne.

At home she found her first letters from Louis in Somaliland awaiting her; and the hopefulness and good spirits which inspired the writer immediately communicated themselves to her as she read:

" . . . Here we are at last on terra firma. The country is open sandy desert, not nearly so hot as I expected, as there is a strong steady N. E. wind always blowing, so the nights are cool. We have a nice roomy camping ground with good wells, and we are all in tents, a luxury we enjoy here for the last time, as no tents will be taken on the march. . . . Saturday I rode out and shot a buck, there are plenty to be got about six miles inland; they are a kind of gazelle, and very good eating. . . . This morning I wandered along the beautiful sandy beach, and watched the great green waves flinging their white manes about and felt all the love for the sea which I always experience when I'm on shore."

Then followed a spirited description of the ingenuity and handiness of the blue jackets in swimming the horses ashore through the surf, which Jeanne only skimmed in her eagerness to arrive at the more personal parts of the letter.

" . . . We are busy working out our transport, cheese-paring and weighing everything, and wondering what we can do without and what, if anything, we can possibly take. . . . 500 camels arrived yesterday from Berbera, and some African boys for work,—and another 500 are expected on another transport soon; they are swum or dragged ashore in the same way as the horses. . . . My best chum writes congratulating me on coming here, and says what lots of fellows say, who have gone home, that England is a happy goal in the abstract, but a little disappointing in realisation; he advises me to stick to every bit of active work I can get till I'm forty. This I am perfectly willing to do, but all his wisdom does n't prevent me from sighing for a glimpse of you, my Jeannie, and I'm a bit impatient to be up and off. . . . For from the day we leave Obbia I shall feel I am trekking towards you—and happiness."

"It is really almost as though he had started on the journey home," cried Jeanne, beaming with joy, and oblivious of the long stretches of waterless burning desert yet to be traversed before Louis could set sail for England.

"Yes, ma'am, I 'm glad indeed, and when does the young master think to be at home?" said Dunham, who now evinced more interest in Louis than in any other human creature.

"He says he hopes probably in the early summer, so far as can be foreseen. Oh, Mrs. Dunham, I have had such a delightful afternoon, and now these letters to keep me company all the evening," said Jeanne. "And—that reminds me," she added nervously, "that the Duke said he would come and see me to-morrow. And I wanted to ask you—*do* you think Mrs. Pyke would mind very much if the pictures were uncovered? The Duke said he would like to see them. If it would not be giving too much trouble, and if you think Mrs. Pyke would not mind?"

"It 's you that 's mistress here, ma'am, not Pyke, I hope," said Mrs. Dunham, with a sudden access of deference for which Jeanne was at a loss to account. "And if she 's not well enough to see to it—and what can be expected at her age?—I 'll speak to the housemaids myself. It 's time everything in the galleries was uncovered again, for poor Miss Marney always had it done from time to time; and since we had the electric light put into the house, she used to like to see the saloons all lit up now and then. I 'll send round to Storr & Warner, the furniture people, at once," said Dunham, suavely. "When did you say his Grace would be here?"

"To-morrow; I think—about tea-time," said Jeanne.

"Then I daresay you 'll wish tea served in the music-room for a change; and the fires lighted. I 'll speak to Hewitt and to the head housemaid. We can easily get it done in time, Miss Jane, between us."

It needed but the approval of Dunham to fill the cup of the lonely lady's felicity full to overflowing.

CHAPTER XII

THE PARTY IN THE PICTURE GALLERY

HEWITT mounted the echoing stone staircase with considerate deliberation, and ushered the Duke into the middle of three communicating saloons on the drawing-room floor.

The tapestry chairs and sofas had been uncovered; and the great folding doors had all been thrown open, so that a long, broad gallery was formed, brilliantly lighted, and hung with pictures from end to end.

The music-room was the largest of the three lofty and spacious saloons; and the little figure in black, seated behind a low table and a steaming urn, at the far end of the gallery, looked quite a long way off, and very solitary.

But Jeanne came hurrying forward between the long lines of full-length portraits, and greeted her cousin warmly on the threshold of the music-room.

"I had the furniture uncovered, and the curtains drawn, and the lights turned on, all for you," she said, delighted, "so that you can look

at the pictures, or play on the piano, or whatever you choose. Mrs. Dunham was so kind about it; she said everything should be arranged properly just as though we were giving a party."

"It is very kind of you to invite me to your party," he said, laughing, "though I am afraid, now I come to think of it, that I invited myself!"

"I am At Home, like the Duchess," said Jeanne, seriously, "and I am very glad you have come. Do you know," she looked round her a little fearfully, "it was rather ghostly before you came, with these ladies and gentlemen watching me from the walls, all lighted up, and looking so lifelike. I felt a little as if I were *really* giving a party, and as if only dead people were at it. You may imagine how nice it was to see a real live human being come in. It feels quite different now, even if one's voice does echo through the rooms more than one could wish."

"You must be very lonely indeed, living by yourself in this big house," said the Duke, wonderingly.

"I am getting used to it, and I do not mind nearly so much now that I sleep on the top floor close to the maids. When first I came they put me in the corner room *there*," she pointed to the closed doors behind her, "quite by myself on this storey. I was dreadfully nervous at night; though less nervous than I should have been if I had known that all the Marneys of Orsett

who ever lived were lining these walls, trying to stare through their shrouds," she shuddered slightly.

"I am sure it is bad for you," said the Duke. "Is n't there some one who could come here and take care of you? you look much too young to be here all alone."

"It is my duty to take care of the house, and the furniture—and I am only alone till Louis comes home," she said wistfully. "I am waiting—waiting—always waiting for him. Sometimes it seems very long."

"How do you occupy yourself?" said the Duke, accepting the tea and cake she offered.

"I *don't* occupy myself very much," she answered, honestly. "You see I am accustomed to a very different kind of life, Cousin Denis. I have always lived on a farm, and helped in all kinds of household work; and here there is nothing of that kind to be done. So I am very dull and unoccupied."

"But there are other kinds of work besides farm work," said the Duke, in a tone of gentle raillery.

She shook her head.

"I have found none."

"You read?"

"I tried," said Jeanne, "as soon as the book-cases were unlocked. But you have no idea what dull old books they are. All f's instead of

s's, and most difficult to understand. Mrs. Dunham says Aunt Caroline used to subscribe to a circulating library, but Uncle Roberts would be so shocked at my reading novels; and I felt, too, I might be getting the wrong ones without Louis to guide me. He used to send me books sometimes. But I know those almost by heart. He sent me cheap editions of what he says are classical standard works, and yet delightful to read, and poetry. And when he went mad over *Cyrano de Bergerac* (he is always enthusiastic over some book or other) he sent me a copy of that, and implored me to read it. But my French is so *very* bad."

"You could improve it," he suggested.

"I finished my education at sixteen," said Jeanne, quite seriously. "You see," she explained, "I shared Cecilia's lessons at the Rectory till she was eighteen, and then she married; so of course the governess went away, and I could learn no more. I don't believe she knew French very well herself, either."

"Then I should be the more inclined to take lessons now," said the Duke, always with the same sound of raillery, half amused, half tender, in his voice.

"But I am twenty-five," said Jeanne.

"So am I—but I am still very busy learning things I don't know."

She smiled.

"I never thought of it, I never heard of people taking lessons at twenty-five!"

"Think of it now; and I will, if you like, find somebody who will be very glad to give you lessons."

"Thank you, Cousin Denis. It is an excellent idea," said Jeanne, gratefully, "and it will help to pass the time till Louis comes home. Do you think I could learn to speak it really well before June?"

"I think you could learn a great deal."

"How glad Louis would be. *He* knows it very well indeed, but then he is so clever at languages. He worked at French and German with all his might when he was cramming for Sandhurst. But I am clever at nothing, and though I boast of my French descent I scarcely know a dozen words of what should be my native language."

"London affords plenty of facilities for most studies," said the Duke; "if I were you I should lose not a moment, but begin at once whilst I had so much time on my hands. I noticed yesterday you were fond of music. Can you play?"

"Not a note."

"I'm afraid I'm rather glad! It is so much better not to play at all than to play a little," said the Duke, whimsically.

"But you can sing?"

"Oh, yes, I can sing; but not like the lady who sang at your concert."

"Heaven forbid," said the Duke, with great fervour. "Still, as I played to you at *my* party, I hope you will sing to me at yours."

"I know more hymns than songs," said Jeanne, "but I can sing 'Rock me to Sleep, Mother,' and 'We are coming, Sister Mary,' and one or two songs like that, if you don't mind my singing without an accompaniment?"

"I hoped you would let me accompany you."

"But I have no music."

"I think I can manage to improvise, if you sing nothing very difficult," he said, smiling.

She looked at him respectfully, now feeling sure that he must be a genius.

"It is very easy to sing in an empty room, I find," said Jeanne, when the last echoes of her clear soprano voice had died away.

The Duke sprang from the music seat, and took her hand impetuously.

"Cousin Jeanne, promise me you will never take any singing lessons?"

"I did not know I needed any," said Jeanne, astonished, and without any idea of the depths of ignorance she thus naively revealed.

He laughed, and laughed again; but always with the same kindness—almost tenderness—in his blue eyes which made his laughter pleasant to hear.

"Is it bad, my singing?" she asked, laughing

in sympathy, and without any anxiety as to his reply. To Jeanne there were but two kinds of singing. One was in tune, and one was not; and she knew she sang in tune.

"It is charming. That is why I should be so sorry to see you learning to make faces, and produce your voice properly. You sing like the peasants in Italy—naturally; only not through your nose as they do! you sing like a thrush in the fields or a lark in the sky—without an effort or a thought. And your voice is as sweet and true as —your heart."

"Oh, Cousin Denis!" said Jeanne, rather shocked, and yet half pleased.

"I could not have said all that, you know—if I had not been your cousin," said the Duke, with his funny little bow. "You are not angry with me for saying it, I hope?"

"How could I be angry? It sounded very—very nice, only rather poetical," said Jeanne, blushing.

He did not answer this, but turned to the piano again, and his fingers presently wandered into an old melody, which he took as the theme of an improvisation, and played rather stormily throughout the removal of the tea things—by Hewitt and William on tiptoe.

"And now for the pictures," he said.

"I cannot tell you much about them," said Jeanne, rather sadly, "for though the names of

the people are written on the backs of all the portraits, luckily, they are much too heavy to move. And no one is left who knows anything about them now Aunt Caroline is dead, except Mrs. Pyke, and Mrs. Dunham thinks *she* is getting rather childish. They did n't dare tell her even about the uncovering of the pictures."

"If I were you I would not have them covered up again. It is not usual to cover up pictures. Suppose one of the more valuable ones were cut out of the frame, why, no one would be any the wiser. Such things have happened."

"I will certainly keep them uncovered," said Jeanne, in alarm. "Aunt Caroline had a mania for covering up everything, even her hands"; she thought of the white kid gloves. "Mr. Valentine said that some of these paintings were very valuable indeed, but that some were only copies of great pictures."

"Here are two fine Van Dycks," said the Duke, pointing out a cavalier Marney and his dame, "and that must certainly be a Sir Joshua. I saw some wonderful Dutch landscapes as I came in."

"Did you like them?" said Jeanne, surprised. "I thought them very ugly."

Though she could tell her cousin Denis so little about the pictures, it presently appeared that he could tell her a great deal.

He recognised the work of various artists, and

was evidently delighted to examine it in detail. She followed him from one picture to another in great amaze. Louis knew nothing about pictures!

"Do you really mean you don't like this Dutch merry-making?" he cried. "This is Jan Steen. Look at the peasants' homely faces overflowing with satisfaction. Or this old schoolmaster by Van Ostade? Or this charming courtyard with the light streaming through the doorway, of de Hooghe?"

"It is all Greek to me," she said honestly. "But I see that when one looks into them they grow more interesting. I like better the pictures in the last room. Oh, this painting of a village street is one of those which Mr. Valentine told me were so valuable."

"It is a Hobbema," said the Duke, instantly.

He tore himself away, but reluctantly, from the Dutch collection; and followed Jeanne to the last room, which contained a few fine copies of famous Italian works, and a landscape of Corot's, on the end wall. It was not, however, to these that Jeanne directed his attention, but to the pictures which crowded both sides of the gallery.

Here were displayed examples of English modern art in oil and water-colour; *genre* pictures and landscapes, painted by the most famous artists of the day, and crowded together in very inartistic confusion.

True to her principles, poor Miss Caroline Marney had spent all her superfluous income in bringing the family collection of pictures up to date.

"I like these by far the best," said Jeanne, lifting her brown, honest eyes to the Duke's face, "and more especially do I like the landscapes; because they seem real to me, and true to nature, and I can understand them."

She showed him the miniatures of her French ancestors, and told him the sad little story of their lives and deaths; and the time sped so quickly that when cousin Denis at last remembered to look at his watch, he found it was almost dinner-time, and rose full of confusion and apology to take his leave.

"Time flies so fast in company," sighed Jeanne.

"What shall you do now—when I leave you?" he asked.

"I shall go down and have my dinner. I am obliged to have late dinner every night," said poor Jeanne, "or Mrs. Dunham says it would give the servants nothing to do, and be very bad for them."

"You dine alone?"

"Quite alone."

"Are you always alone at meals?" he cried, compassionately.

"Up to the present I have been; but on Saturday

Cecilia and her husband are coming to dine. They could not come before," she explained, "because Mr. Hogg-Watson had not a free evening."

"Is that Hogg-Watson the lecturer? I heard him the other night. He is very clever."

"You seem to know everything and everybody," said Jeanne, with great admiration. "I cannot think how you came to know so much about pictures?"

"I know very little; but you see I am debarred from the active amusements fellows of my age usually have to distract them, so I've had to find my interest in other things; travelling, art, music, and so forth," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone, but Jeanne divined that the subject of his infirmity was a painful one.

"I suppose you would not,—I wonder if you would—is it proper to ask *you* to come and dine on Saturday too?" said Jeanne, wistfully. "You are so kind you would tell me if I were making another mistake in asking you. But when I told Mrs. Dunham about the Hogg-Watsons coming, she said I ought to have a fourth, and make the table even. I was afraid she would be rather annoyed with me for letting them come so soon (comparatively) after poor Aunt Caroline's death; but she said nothing under six people could be counted as a dinner party; it *could* only be a little dinner, and it would be a

relief to her to think Hewitt and William had something extra to do."

"I think it would be exceedingly proper to ask me," said the Duke, promptly, "and I will certainly come. Thank you very much."

"Thank *you*," said Jeanne, joyfully. "I was so afraid you might be engaged like the Professor; but I suppose you are not celebrated, as he is. I will write you a little note, and tell you about the time and everything. Now I shall look forward to it. I *was* feeling rather nervous, for I have never been used to late dinner at all, till I came here, far less asked any one to dine with me. But now you will sit at the head of the table in Louis's place; and perhaps you will be kind enough to frown at me if I do anything wrong."

"With pleasure," said the Duke. "And I shall like to get the little note. Be sure you don't forget to send it."

"I never forget anything," said Jeanne, in simple good faith.

As the Duke drove home to dress, as fast as a hansom could take him, he noted in his pocket book the necessity for telegraphing his excuses immediately to the country house where he was engaged to stay for the approaching week-end.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LITTLE DINNER

"You had best wear black grenadine, ma'am," said Dunham. "That is light, yet not too light. It is well over the two calendar months now, and you need not mind having an evening dress made simple, without any crape at all. We can go to the dressmaker in Mount Street, who did plain things for my poor lady. She would have liked to know you was employing her. And if I passed her the word as it was something special, she would make you up a plain gown in two days."

"I thought I should like black velvet," said Jeanne, but diffidently. "It has been almost the dream of my life to have a velvet dress."

"Well, 'm, I suppose it 's a dream as comes to every woman sooner or later, gentle or simple. Years upon years I used to wonder if I 'd ever get a silk gown; and no sooner had I got it, than I could n't keep my thoughts off velvet myself, though unsuitable. But you 're too young for it yet, Miss Jane, or too young-looking, which comes to the same thing."

"I want it to be as nice as possible," said

Jeanne, anxiously. "As it 's my first real evening dress, you know."

"And who would make up a Genoa velvet, as it should be made, in two days? Besides it's being nothing at all without good lace—which I dare n't give you out—though your poor aunt had plenty put by—without the young master's leave, for it 's worth its weight in gold; and he 'll be wanting it for *his* lady one of these days; as is his right, Miss Jane," said Dunham, who always spoke as though she were safeguarding the interests of Louis from any possible inroads his sister might be tempted to make, during his absence. "No, it must be grenadine, and nothing else."

So it was grenadine, and when Jeanne looked in the glass and beheld herself for the first time in an evening gown, she was not inclined to quarrel with the result.

In accordance with the Duke's advice, and after consultation with Mr. Valentine, she had induced the servants to refrain from recovering the pictures, and then and thereafter Jeanne passed no inconsiderable portion of her endless leisure in the saloons, where she became familiar with the Dutch landscapes so much appreciated by her cousin Denis, and began to like them a little, after all.

"You must receive your guests in the morning-room, ma'am, and after dinner it will be some-

thing to do to go up to the galleries and look at the pictures, especially as his Grace is so fond of them; and to play the piano in the music-room," said Dunham, anxiously instructing the frightened hostess. "I 'm sure nothing could look nicer than you do, Miss Jane. It would please Mrs. Pyke if we asked her to step up and see you. When my poor lady was dressed for the Opera or the Drawing-room, they was all let to come and look at her."

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham, I shall never be worth looking at like poor Aunt Caroline must have been. Even in her sick-room she was just like a picture," said Jeanne, humbly.

"That was nothing to what she *could* look, when she had the family jewels on."

"Are they very beautiful?"

"They 're very valuable, 'm, and it was always a load off my mind when they was safe at the bank as they are now. For many 's the time I 've shook in my shoes thinking how easily we might have our throats cut in our beds if evil-disposed persons knew what was in the house."

Jeanne submitted nervously to the ordeal of being exhibited by Dunham to Mrs. Pyke and the four housemaids, who walked round her in a solemn and awestruck silence; not so much afraid of her, as of Mrs. Pyke and Dunham, whose eyes were upon them.

Pyke, in her thin tremulous voice, expressed

her pleasure and admiration, but the housemaids knew their place too well to speak at all. They made up for this discretion by imparting their opinions afterwards to each other, with the utmost freedom.

"Nothing but a plain black evening dress, hardly even cut low to speak of—an old-fashioned grenadine!" said one disappointed maiden.

"The young ladies in my last place wore the same every night of their lives, and we never took any notice. But I suppose that old Dunham thinks anything is a treat to us," said another.

"Poor thing," said the youngest housemaid. "She's pretty, is n't she, with her neck and arms so white, and her eyes and hair so dark."

"She has a lovely colour," the first housemaid agreed, "but she's no way with her, not a bit. Just a simple little thing! Any one could tell she came out of the country and never been nowhere nor seen nobody."

"You take care what you say, Eliza; for Mr. Hewitt told William it's his belief she'll be Duchess of Monaghan one of these days."

"I'm sure I hope she will then," said the youngest housemaid sympathetically, "for she always looks kind and gentle at me as if she'd speak if she dared. But that Dunham's got her under her thumb. I wouldn't be ordered about in my own brother's house, if I was in her place; no, I wouldn't."

Meanwhile Jeanne—unconscious of the calmness with which her person, and the possibilities of her future, were being discussed by the younger inmates of the household—took her place on the hearthrug of the morning-room, and anxiously awaited her expected guests.

Mr. and Mrs. Hogg-Watson were the first to arrive, and she stepped forward with some trepidation, to greet them.

Her alarm was not diminished by Cecilia's first communication, made with that rapidity and secrecy which is peculiar to intimate female friendship, and quite unsuspected by the tall spectacled gentleman following in her wake, who merely beheld a tender prolonged embrace between his wife and her hostess.

"He is in one of his worst moods," breathed Cecilia in Jeanne's ear, "be very careful what you say."

Jeanne shook hands with Mr. Hogg-Watson, after this warning, without daring to lift her eyes to his face; and was relieved that he said nothing worse than "How do you do?" and thankful that he immediately turned his attention to the Romney portrait over the mantelpiece, leaving his wife to make as much or as little conversation as she chose.

"I declare, Jeanne, what a delightful room! Crammed with hothouse flowers—you extravagant creature! And all this Louis Quinze

furniture, or is it Louis Seize? I never know the difference. Isn't it charming, Joseph?"

Receiving no response but a grunt to this incautious appeal, she nodded and winked expressively at Jeanne behind the professor's stooping shoulders, and continued her cheerful remarks.

"I do think you are the luckiest person in the whole world. Never did any one's past contrast so vividly with their present as yours. When I remember what you were at Coed-Ithel farm in your early days—and look at you now!"

Jeanne could not help thinking that Cecilia presented quite as remarkable a contrast to what she had been in early days, as she did herself.

Whether she recalled her as a prim little girl in a blue cotton pinafore, with a fair pigtail,—feeding the Rectory fowls; or as a tall young person in a home-made blue merino, and a plain straw hat, leading the choir in church, and walking with her father to visit school and cottages; setting a demure example in neatness to the village girls,—it seemed equally impossible to connect the memory with the Mrs. Hogg-Watson of the present.

Cecilia's golden hair was now elaborately waved, dressed, and perfumed; and ornamented by a large diamond star.

She wore the black velvet of poor Jeanne's dreams; but, far from thinking it necessary to shroud herself in the old lace which Mrs. Dunham

had declared to be an indispensable adjunct, she had boldly courted the contrast between the severely cut tight-fitting black velvet and the snowy white of her neck and shoulders.

Modest Jeanne blushed when she perceived so large a proportion of Cecilia's charms unveiled; and she thought of the horror which would overcome poor Mrs. Davies could she behold her daughter thus excessively *décolletée*. But Cecilia mistook her friend's anguished glance for envy, and smiled inwardly at the contrast presented by her own highly finished *toilette* to the quiet unornamented gown of the little rustic Jeanne, who appeared quite unable to rise to the opportunities afforded her, by her brother's fine house and ample fortune.

"I have invited my cousin to meet you, Cecilia," said Jeanne, timidly, "to make a fourth."

"Your cousin! What cousin? I did not know you had a cousin!" said Cecilia, with lively curiosity. "Who is he?"

"The Duke of Monaghan."

"The Duke of—!" Cecilia opened her mouth and was yet speechless.

"He is a very distant cousin, but he was related to poor Aunt Caroline—" said Jeanne, hastily, "and he has heard the Prof—your husband's—Mr. Hogg-Watson lecture."

At the word lecture, the great man turned round, and brought his eyes slowly to the level

of Jeanne's countenance as she sat, nervously perched on the extreme edge of her aunt's low chair by the occasional table.

"Where was that?" he said.

"I do not think he said where."

The Professor emitted another slight grunt, and returned to the picture.

"Is n't he just what I told you?" asked Cecilia, in mute pantomime of eyes and fingers.

Jeanne made a gesture signifying that it was too early for her to offer an opinion of the Professor's character. So far she must be content to own that, from his appearance, Cecilia was justified in having described him as an ugly and powerful man; of his fascinating qualities he had, as yet, certainly afforded her no evidence.

The entrance of the Duke relieved Jeanne of much embarrassment.

Cousin Denis was at once so quiet, so self-possessed and so helpful, that she felt her heart expand in sudden grateful recognition of his good breeding.

He recalled the subject and the occasion of the Professor's lecture so pleasantly, that the great man's brow cleared; for the compliments of a Duke, even though he be but a young one, are usually acceptable to the average Britisher; and Mr. Hogg-Watson, his learning and celebrity notwithstanding, was but an average Britisher after all.

Far from being too much shocked by the scantiness of her bodice (as Jeanne had almost feared Cousin Denis might be) to even look at Cecilia,—he offered her his arm with an engaging smile, when Hewitt announced dinner, the instant he perceived that Jeanne was at a loss; and remarking that in the absence of his cousin Louis he had been requested to take his place, led her across the hall to the great dining-room, where the table laid for four persons appeared but as a small island in the midst of a wide sea of *parquet* flooring.

Jeanne followed with the Professor, observing thankfully that his glance at her, when he gave her his arm, was not an unkind one.

After all, she was by no means so certain of his ugliness.

A very fine pair of intent grey eyes shone behind his glasses; a shock of hair between grey and flaxen fell over his broad forehead; and if his nose were surprisingly long and beaky, so were the noses, she reflected, of many great men; whilst his massive uneven profile, and wide mouth, even though rather grim, were not destitute of humour.

Long before the end of dinner Jeanne found herself wondering why he had married Cecilia.

If Mrs. Hogg-Watson had been content to be herself—lively, talkative, inconsequent, and more than a little vulgar,—it is possible she might have

succeeded in amusing the Duke of Monaghan very well. But though this end was the object of her constant endeavour throughout the meal, she unfortunately missed attaining it, through her assumption of a personality which did not belong to her.

Jeanne, who did not know that Cecilia was trying to play the rôle of a smart woman of society, listened to her affected, coquettish, and sometimes *risquée* conversation, with a countenance more expressive of surprise and dismay than she knew.

She did not recognise the type which Cecilia was endeavouring, from the most superficial observation, to emulate; and in her simplicity, was heartily ashamed of her friend.

Every now and then the Professor broke in upon his wife's statements with a flat contradiction; but these interruptions, however they might embarrass the Duke and his cousin Jeanne, appeared not to ruffle the complacency of Cecilia in the slightest degree.

"My husband is never happy except when he's travelling, Duke. And I am afraid I am a shockingly old-fashioned wife," said Cecilia, archly, "for I often go with him, instead of staying at home, where I should have a much better time; now should n't I?"

"I dislike travelling more than anything in the world," growled the Professor, breaking off his remarks to Jeanne, and casting a look of

positive dislike across the table at his communicative spouse.

"Ah; so you say. But 'facts is facts,' and though we have but just returned from South America, we are going to spend the summer in Berlin."

"I am not going to Berlin," stated Mr. Hogg-Watson; "or if I do go, I shall go alone."

"We shall see about that when the time comes," said Cecilia, more coquettishly than ever. Perhaps it was her affectation which made her seem less handsome in Jeanne's eyes to-night, than she had appeared in her own house.

"Your name is French. It is historical. There have been great men of that name," said Mr. Hogg-Watson to Jeanne, abruptly. "Have you not relatives in France? Or is it Jersey that you come from?"

"No, we have nothing to do with Jersey. My ancestors were French," said Jeanne, delighted at his choice of a subject.

"You speak French very well, I suppose?"

"I can scarcely speak it at all. And I have never been in France," said Jeanne, rather sorrowfully.

"I am sure, Jeanne, you know French almost as well as I do," said Cecilia, with encouraging patronage. "Your little cousin and I were brought up together, you know," she said, turning to the Duke.

"At least you know enough to be aware how little you know," said the Professor, ignoring his wife. "That is a preliminary to learning more. Your name is familiar to me, because a man of that name was killed in the Boer War."

"Are you sure?" said Jeanne, much excited. "My brother was in the Boer War, but he was certainly not killed. Not even wounded, I am thankful to say. Surely Louis would have heard of it."

"It is as I say," said the Professor, shortly.

"Please tell me about it," said Jeanne, abashed. "We always hoped there might possibly be descendants of Charles de Courset, my great-uncle who stayed at home when his brother emigrated. Louis hoped some day for time and means to search them out. He would be so interested to know. But how came a Frenchman to be fighting for us?"

"He was not fighting for us, but for the Boers."

"For the Boers!"

"Early in 1900," said the Professor, "the French volunteer, General de Villebois-Mareuil, in command of the foreign legion, was killed at Boshof. You heard of that, I presume?"

"Yes, yes," said Jeanne, breathlessly.

"I was present at his funeral. He was a brave man. He was buried with military honours. Some of his companions were killed, some wounded and some taken prisoners. I helped to attend

a wounded prisoner, because I happened to speak French fluently. His name was de Courset. This conveyed nothing to me at the time, of course, for I am not aware that I had ever heard your name mentioned."

She thought he cast a withering glance across the table at Cecilia, who reddened slightly, but was obliged to be silent; for the Duke had turned towards Mr. Hogg-Watson and was listening with obvious interest to his recital.

"I remember," said the Professor,—he looked only at Jeanne's eyes—"this poor fellow interested me more than the others, by his courage, heroism indeed, in bearing the pain that I—" she turned so white that he skilfully changed the ending of the phrase—"cut as short as possible by placing him under anæsthetics. He was devoted to his leader, in fact they all were. I saw a little gold medal worn by poor de Villebois-Mareuil inscribed 'to a great Frenchman from the companions of his daughter.' De Courset told me that his own daughter had been one of these companions, and the friend of the poor General's child."

"Did he die?" said Jeanne, hardly above a whisper.

"It was impossible to save him," said the Professor. His gruff voice was quite kind. "He was laid by the side of de Villebois-Mareuil, as he wished, at Boshof."

"I must write and tell Louis," said Jeanne. "He will not lose a moment, when he comes home, in following up such a clue. We will never rest till we find our family. Did he tell you where his daughter lived? or give you messages or letters for her?"

"He confided everything of that kind to his comrades, no doubt," said the Professor. "His things were sent to Pretoria with the rest."

"Thank you very, very much for telling me about it, Professor," said Jeanne.

She forgot her shyness, and awe of Cecilia's husband, and spoke as earnestly and naturally as though she had been addressing Louis himself; or Cousin Denis, with whom she was quite at her ease.

Mr. Hogg-Watson was by no means insensible to the charm of simplicity; he thawed completely; or perhaps the excellence of the dinner had softened his mood.

"Where is this brother, may I ask?"

"In Somaliland." Jeanne could hardly forbear a reproachful look towards her friend. Had she not thought it worth while to mention to her husband that Louis was now—perhaps even at this moment—risking his life in the service of his country?

The Professor looked grave.

"It is not a nice place."

"He had only just arrived when he wrote.

He was at Obbia; and he said it was not nearly such a bad climate as he expected. Quite the contrary," said Jeanne, anxiously. "He is used to India, you know, and he has been all through the South African War. This will be quite a short expedition, Louis thinks."

"I hope you will get him home very soon," said the Professor, and this time his voice sounded more cheerful.

All the smiles and signs of Cecilia failed to explain to Jeanne that the moment had now come when a move must be made, and that it was upon her that the duty of making it devolved.

Hewitt—too stupid to whisper to his young lady the hint that Mrs. Dunham, in his place, would not have scrupled to bestow—brought in coffee, and they drank it; he handed round cigarettes and cigars—and still Jeanne sat quietly on; until the tact of her watchful cousin was again exerted on her behalf.

"Perhaps, Cousin Jeanne, you will give us leave to smoke down here, when you and Mrs. Hogg-Watson withdraw the light of your presence," he said, smiling at her across the table.

"Oh yes, certainly," she cried in confusion; and Cecilia, rising very thankfully, put her arm through her friend's, and led her playfully out of the room; the Duke politely opening the door, and closing it behind them.

"My dear! Did n't you see me? I could n't

catch your eye. You should have bowed to me long ago. But, however, it does n't matter—', cutting short Jeanne's distressed apologies for her unwitting omission. "I was dying to get away and talk to you. I am simply *pinning* to know what you think of Joseph. He was quite *épris* with you. But that is his way. You must n't think anything of it. He is always taken with every fresh face he meets; and then people think him charming! I only wish they knew what he was like at home. I assure you he was like a bear in the brougham. But I suppose men are always like that with the women they really care for," said Cecilia, with a sharp glance at Jeanne's innocent face.

"He seemed very kind," was all poor Jeanne could reply; for Cecilia's tones made her uncomfortable, though she could not tell why.

"As for your poor, little, lame Duke," said Mrs. Hogg-Watson, condescendingly. "He is a nice little thing. I quite liked him, though he was rather heavy in hand. I remember all about his family now. One way and another I get to hear most people's history. I believe he was mixed up in some Gaiety scandal; but I may be confusing him with somebody else. Anyway, I know he does n't get on with his mother. I believe she quite hates the sight of him on account of his club foot."

"Oh, Cecilia, not really," cried Jeanne, without

pausing to consider whether this item were more likely to be accurate than the rest of Cecilia's intelligence.

"No wonder, when the others are such fine athletic men," said Cecilia, tossing her head. "I saw one of them play in a cricket match once. That is why I enquired all about the family. Lord Brian something was his name."

"But he was not born with a club foot," said Jeanne, bethinking herself. "He fell downstairs in this very house, and injured his spine—when he was a little boy. And, Cecilia, I think you must be mistaken, for nothing could be more friendly than his mother's manner to him when I saw them together."

"Do you know the Duchess?" This time the jealousy in Cecilia's voice was unmistakable.

"I can't say I *know* her, but I have been to her house—to an At Home; and she left a card here, but 'she did not ask to come in,' said scrupulous Jeanne.

"Well, then of course you know her. I wish you would get *me* an invitation to her house," said Cecilia. "Bless me, Jeanne, if only I had your opportunities I should be at the top of the tree in no time, and know every one in London."

"I thought you had so many friends."

"I said—'of a kind,'" said Cecilia, discontentedly. "And I have trouble enough to keep even them together. I wasted a guinea on that

announcement in the *Morning Post*, hoping it would bring in a few invitations; and all that came of it was a shoal of letters for Joseph, which he won't let me so much as open."

She looked enviously round the music-room, into which Jeanne now conducted her.

"All these pictures must be worth a mint of money. You will see, Joseph will go straight to look at them the instant he comes up here, and we shall get no more fun out of him at all. However, there will be the Duke for you and me to talk to. It is a pity he is so young. Do you see much of him, by the bye?" with an elaborate carelessness of manner and that sharp side glance of which Jeanne was becoming acutely conscious. "Does he come often?"

"He has only been twice before," said Jeanne, coldly.

She was vaguely offended by the meaning tone which Cecilia adopted in speaking of her kind cousin Denis.

Oh, why had she asked Cecilia here? Why had she ever sought her out at all? Would it not have been wiser, remembering her as an odious little girl, to have shunned her altogether as a woman?

"Well, I warn you, I shall monopolise him when he comes up-stairs, just as I did at dinner," said Cecilia, with an exasperating laugh. "If he wants to talk to *you*, you know, he can very

easily outstay us. Joseph never stops up late if he can possibly help it."

The entrance of the Duke and Mr. Hogg-Watson came as a relief; and his wife's prophecy was fulfilled, for the Professor was immediately absorbed in the Dutch landscapes.

Cousin Denis went straight to the piano, and began to play, unasked.

He saw Jeanne's troubled brow, and his music presently charmed the shadows from her down-cast, pensive face; but he did not ask her to sing to-night; he played quietly on and on.

Nevertheless he did not outstay Mr. and Mrs. Hogg-Watson, but rose from the piano at half-past ten, and bade Jeanne good night in a very kind and gentle tone.

Mrs. Hogg-Watson, on the tapestry settee, was yawning unrestrainedly. She cared neither for pictures nor for music, and thought it very rude of Jeanne to attend more earnestly to her cousin's playing than to her friend's whispered confidences.

"Of course she is doing her best to catch him; but I do not feel sure she will succeed, though he is evidently a dreadful prig," reflected Cecilia, as she shook hands warmly with the Duke, and begged him to call upon her.

"Thank you very much. You are exceedingly kind," he said, and Jeanne learnt with surprise that Cousin Denis could be frigid as well as polite when he chose.

When they had all gone, she sat alone in the silent gallery, among the dead Marneys of Orsett, the sombre Dutch pictures, and the modern landscapes which filled the wintry night with visions of summer skies, and woods and streams and poppied fields—and cried a little, softly, over the failure of her dinner party.

“I think I never, never hated anything so much,” she thought, miserably. “What was the good of my pretty frock, or the beautiful dinner that kept Mrs. Pyke and the cook awake all night planning it; or the trouble poor Hewitt took to arrange the daffodils on the table, or kind cousin Denis coming to help me, or anything—when Cecilia was so horrid. Oh, poor Aunt Caroline, this just shows how very unfit I am to entertain anybody in your beautiful house. But it will all be quite different—when Louis comes home.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUKE

UNTIL he was nineteen or twenty years old the Duke of Monaghan had lived the life of a recluse; less perhaps because his health had latterly required such complete seclusion, than because it was difficult to shake off the compulsory habits of invalidism formed during the earlier years of his boyhood.

The dukedom had descended upon his father almost as unexpectedly as the fortune of Miss Marney upon Louis de Courset. The distant cousin whom the late Duke had succeeded,—having a large family of daughters for whom he was naturally desirous to make every provision in his power,—left as little as he could help to his heir-at-law; and consequently Denis was in proportion to his rank, a poor man.

It had therefore been impressed upon him from his earliest youth by his mother, that if he married at all, he must marry money.

The Duke had smiled a melancholy smile at the very notion of marriage; but he was fully

alive, nevertheless, to the embarrassment of his poverty; with a number of people dependent upon him; a large landed estate which brought in next to no profit, and a magnificent castle tumbling into ruins for want of the necessary repairs.

The Duchess had been a West-Country heiress, and had a large fortune of her own; but she spent her income royally; and as the capital was tied up on her second son, Dermot, it would not benefit the Duke, nor his impoverished Irish estate.

She rented a house in Park Lane, spent the autumn in Scotland, the winter in her home on the borders of Devon and Somerset, and the spring in the south of France.

But she never went to Ireland if she could help it; and when her son visited Cuilmore, he was obliged to visit it alone.

It was with extreme reluctance, and at the insistence of his guardians, that the Duchess permitted her invalid son, over whom she had maintained complete control for twenty years, to quit her maternal care and to go to Oxford; but perhaps she had, as his guardians believed, overdoctored the Duke, oppressed his spirits and retarded his recovery by her constant and arbitrary supervision, for the remarkable improvement which took place in his health undoubtedly dated from the beginning of his college career.

His melancholy lessened; he began to find it

possible to be interested even in the sports he could never hope to join; his natural abilities, which were considerable, were called into play; he perceived that it was open to him to distinguish himself if he would among his fellows, in spite of his lameness.

He had been educated, of course, entirely at home; but his tutor had been a wise and learned German; a master of languages and a fine musician. He had directed and formed the boy's taste for reading, encouraged his love of music, and laid the foundations upon which Denis presently based the structure of a very creditable University career.

Shaking the yoke of his mother's authority off his long-suffering shoulders, the Duke spent his vacations abroad; at first with his old tutor in anxious attendance; but later, with younger and more cheerful companions.

He found himself, to his astonishment, able to live much as they lived, though his lameness naturally precluded him from sharing their more active exercises.

But he studied music with enthusiasm, and became familiar with the art galleries of Europe.

When he left Oxford, he proceeded to visit his neglected estates in Ireland; but here disappointment and disillusion awaited him.

Nothing could be done without money, and of money he had none, or next to none.

As soon as the accumulations of his minority were at his disposal,—which was not, according to his father's will, until he was five and twenty,—he did what he could, which was something, and dreamed of doing more. The careless luxury of the expenditure in Park Lane angered him when he thought of the silent, deserted, and almost ruined halls of his predecessors.

Concerning his feelings for his mother, Denis dwelt upon them as little as possible. He was not in sympathy with her, and she resented what she believed to be his ingratitude. Probably it was rather his independence that she resented. Having grown accustomed to settle everything for her eldest son, to have him always under her own eye, and to consider him as helpless as an infant, she did not relish his sudden emancipation, and found his restoration to health irksome in fact, though in theory she was obliged to rejoice.

Nevertheless she respected Denis; she knew him to be steady and high-principled, as his brothers were wild, careless, and extravagant; and she wished him to marry, with all her heart.

She was becoming indeed somewhat feverishly anxious upon the subject, and unlike the generality of mothers, was prepared to welcome almost any young woman whom her son might select, provided only that she had a fair fortune.

On this point the Duchess was firm.

Though her own parentage was unexceptionable, (or perhaps because of this fact), she was not painfully exclusive in principle.

She was not of those who are the bane of the newly rich, and the successfully married, unimpressed by present appearances, searching for humble pasts preferably ignored, and crying always. But who *was* she?

On the contrary the only question that vexed her economic soul was, How much?

"Let her be respectable and not *smart*; let her but have a *dot* sufficient to set them up in comfort, and I care nothing who she may be," thought the Duchess.

But it was her despair that the Duke did not seem inclined to marry at all.

She had never been of a demonstrative nature, and the petting and coaxing which had been bestowed upon the crippled boy had come from his attendants and not from his mother, whom he had rather feared than loved.

His affection had been for his father, who, passionately regretful of the misfortune which had befallen his heir, had lavished upon him every indulgence in his power. The Duke's death had crushed the spirits of the little invalid, and made him grave and melancholy beyond his years.

But in proportion to the deprivations of his boyhood, did the young man now enjoy the

existence which to his brothers appeared so devoid of amusement and excitement.

It was not considered prudent that he should hunt, but he rode in moderation, and walked as much as his lameness permitted, and the exercise increased his strength; he lost the air of almost ethereal delicacy which constant confinement had bestowed, and though he must always be delicate, looked and was, perfectly healthy and well.

His brothers loved him sincerely, but pitied him more; for a man who could neither hunt, play cricket, nor go deer-stalking must be always, in their opinion, an object of pity.

From the sports and games that were, at this period of their lives, the salt of their existence, he was for ever debarred, and though they were accustomed to his exclusion from their favourite pursuits; they were sorry for him whenever they remembered it.

They were rough, good-hearted young fellows, with a strain of their mother's overbearing disposition in their natures which may have accounted for their quarrels with their surviving parent, and with each other. But with Denis they never quarrelled, partly because of his own gentleness, and partly because in their frequent scrapes he always shielded and sympathised with them. Since for so many years his spirit had chafed under the knowledge of his own utter

helplessness and dependence, it afforded him, indeed, especial satisfaction to be of use to them, and to others; and he assumed his position as head of the house with an almost pathetically earnest determination to do his duty therein.

Thus rejoicing in his newly-acquired freedom, he was divided between amusement and disgust, when his mother, with tears in her eyes, recommended to him one nice, kind, motherly, young creature (with money) after another, as exactly formed to take care of him, and watch over his valuable health.

It was the helplessness, the timidity, the childishness of little Jeanne, that had touched him, during the ridiculous episode of her unauthorised call upon one of the most conventional women in London.

The young man's heart still leapt to recall the look she had cast upon him—the appeal for help in her beautiful frightened brown eyes—the glad relief and gratitude of the little dimpling face, when he had cast his shyness to the winds, and come to her assistance—the flush of joy when he boldly claimed kinship, and the right to show, in some measure, the sympathy and interest with which his heart was filled at the mere touch of the magic wand of first love.

For though he was five and twenty years old, and had loved innumerable heroines of history and fiction and imagination, and even a few

never-to-be-forgotten but personally nearly unknown goddesses in real life; yet Denis knew, almost the instant that he set eyes upon Jeanne, that here was his first and last and only love.

Having looked upon himself, pensively, for some years past, as one wedded to his art alone, he was the more taken aback by the strength and suddenness of his passion; and inclined to ridicule himself for the discovery that the conditions of a man's life—even though he may have spent an invalid boyhood—are not necessarily fixed and unchangeable at the age of twenty-five; but every day his love took a stronger hold of him in defiance of ridicule or bewilderment.

He thought of his brothers, who had been in and out of half-a-dozen love affairs already, quite unknown to the Duchess, and who remained apparently perfectly cheerful and heart-whole in spite of these experiences.

He thought of his poverty,—of his mother's certain indignation, (for, though her brother might be rich, Jeanne herself, so far as he knew, had not a penny in the world)—of the absolute necessity of his marrying money if he married at all—of the wisdom of remaining as he was, and allowing his wealthy brother Dermot to succeed him; and the upshot of all his reflections was, after nearly a week's indecision—that he determined to remain in London for the present instead of returning to Ireland, and to call at

99 Grosvenor Square again, upon the very first opportunity that should present itself.

During this week, time hung less heavily than usual upon Jeanne's hands; for she had found an occupation.

She worked at her French for a couple of hours every morning under the guidance of the old professor sent to her by the Duke of Monaghan, and in the afternoon prepared diligently long exercises for his inspection on the morrow.

So delighted was she with her own progress that she even began to indulge in dreams of a translation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, as a triumphant surprise wherewith to greet her brother on his return; but at present she contented herself with choosing his favourite work for the daily reading which was to improve her accent and extend her acquaintance with the language.

At the end of the week, Cecilia appeared; very smartly dressed in scarlet cloth and white fox, a combination eminently becoming to her fair skin and golden hair, though qualified to render the stoutness of her figure yet more conspicuous.

"Well, you dear thing, you have never asked me to drive, as you promised, so I have come to look you up. What do you think? Joseph has been telegraphed for to Berlin, and has gone off at a moment's notice. I cannot make up my mind whether to follow him or not."

"Has he gone for a long time?"

"That is just it. That is my dilemma. He was in one of his moods when he went away and would not give me an idea how long he was likely to be. If I pack up and follow him, he may be starting home just as I arrive; and I should have the journey for nothing; he played that trick on me once before; and if I put off going, why, he may stay on and on, and I be missing all sorts of functions to which they would be obligated to invite me if I were with him. What would you advise?"

"I should do what he wished, of course," said Jeanne, bluntly.

"It is all very well for you to say that, but a married woman knows very well that it does a man no good to spoil him; he would not thank her if she did," said Cecilia peevishly. "Wait till you have a husband of your own, my dear. A *propos*, have you seen anything of our little friend, the Duke?"

Jeanne coloured rather angrily at the tone in which Cecilia pronounced these words; but a certain embarrassment made her glad to be able to answer she had not seen her cousin since the night of the little dinner.

"Do you mean to say that after dining here, he has not called!" said Cecilia with exaggerated surprise. "How very rude."

"I do not see that it is rude."

"My dear! you own yourself that you are quite unacquainted with *les convenances*," said Cecilia, with dignity. "It is usual to leave cards, at least, after dining."

"But you and the Professor have not left cards," cried Jeanne.

Cecilia recollected herself in some confusion.

"That is quite different. I have known you all your life. One does not stand on ceremony with old friends, you know."

"Perhaps relations do not stand on ceremony either."

"My dear! He is the most distant cousin in the world. I have been looking him up; and it was three generations ago that one of them married a Marney of Orsett."

"I had not meant to boast of it," said Jeanne, colouring. "I know it is very distant."

"Oh, you need not apologise," said Cecilia, more good-naturedly. "If I were related to a Duke, however distantly, I should take just as much care it was known as you do yourself. And *you* have more reason to care about it than I—having relations at what one might call the other end of the social scale." In this delicate manner Cecilia strove to remind Jeanne of the existence of her uncle Roberts the farmer. "Yes, I looked the Duke up, and I was surprised to find how old he was. He is six and twenty. I took him for the merest boy. I suppose we fair-haired

folk have a knack of looking younger than we really are."

Jeanne endeavoured to turn the conversation by admiring Cecilia's dress, which indeed was of a very striking and elegant cut.

"It is not a bad little frock," said Mrs. Hogg-Watson, as carelessly as though she had been all her life accustomed to wearing two thousand-franc gowns from the Maison Doucet, "one must be tidy for London, you know. Otherwise I never worry about my clothes, though I am so particular about the children's."

"I hope the children are well?"

"Oh, they are always well—or if they are not, they have the best of nurses to look after them. What have you here? Exercises! Books! You sly thing; you are studying to fit yourself for anything that may turn up! Well, this is foresight indeed!"

"I am improving my French, to please Louis."

"To please Louis indeed! Seriously Jeanne, you might be a little more open with such an old friend; but however, I will not press you. I am the last person to force a confidence. Only I know the world better than you do, perhaps I ought to utter a word of warning. His brother, Lord Dermot Liscarney, has the reputation of being a dreadful flirt, and I have no doubt this young man is just the same. Don't make too sure. Even though of course your position is

very different from what it used to be, (for I suppose Louis could hardly refuse to make some kind of a settlement upon you, so devoted as you have always been), still—a Duke is a Duke, and not very likely to marry out of his own sphere.”

After an ineffectual effort to persuade her friend to accompany her on a shopping expedition, Mrs. Hogg-Watson at length took her leave, without waiting for tea; and Jeanne felt, as the door closed behind her, that there were, after all, worse things than solitude in this world.

She had scarcely recovered her equanimity when the Duke walked into the room.

An hour ago she would have welcomed him with unaffected joy; but now her greeting was so constrained that he could not but observe the alteration in her manner.

“Something has been vexing you, Cousin Jeanne,” he said, in his peculiarly gentle tones. “May I know what it is? You have no bad news, I hope?”

Jeanne shook her head.

“No, I have no news at all. In my last letter he had just left Obbia; so he must now, as he said, be marching towards me.” She hesitated a moment, and then said, “Cecilia has just been here.”

“Oh!” said the Duke, so expressively that Jeanne smiled, feeling more at ease.

“You do not like her?”

"I can believe that a prolonged *tête à tête* with her might be—rather trying," said the Duke, who was too polite to own that he disliked any one, far less a lady whom he had met under Jeanne's own auspices.

"She says such things"—faltered Jeanne, petulantly.

"Then do not let your mind dwell on the things she says," he said, rather hurriedly. "Some people say impossible things. It is a kind of habit, and the only way to avoid being ruffled is to think of something else. How do you like my old professor?"

"He is the kindest old man in the world," she said, and Denis smiled to see how easily her thoughts were diverted from her vexation. "And do you know he has promised to write to a friend of his, who used to live in Paris—(but he is not quite sure if he is still alive)—and make enquiries for me about the poor de Courset who was killed in the South African War?"

"But it does not sound very hopeful," said the Duke, unable to help smiling again. "I know his ways, poor fellow; he would be quite satisfied to wait a year or two for an answer from the possibly deceased friend! There are quicker methods of research than his. If you would care to employ them I will help you with all my heart."

"Oh, thank you, Cousin Denis. I do long to

find out. Would not it be delightful if Louis and I discovered some *near* relations of our own? I have always wished to belong to a family and it would make our French descent seem so much more *real*. Louis used to plan that directly he could afford it, he and I were going to France, to look for the Château de Courset, and to try and find our relatives."

"Then might he not be a little disappointed to find we had forestalled him? Since he is coming home so soon?"

"I never thought of that," said Jeanne. "To be sure he would. For Louis likes to do things himself. And we could start off together if I waited till he came home."

"Then perhaps it would be wiser to leave the enquiries in the Professor's hands for the present, where I believe they will be quite safe, and perfectly stationary."

"I think it would," she was obliged to own, "and at least, if I go on with my French, I shall be able to talk to my family when I *do* find them, which I certainly could not do at present! You do not despise us for having French blood, do you?"

"I have no insular prejudices, I hope," said the Duke, laughing.

"I cannot understand any one's not being proud of the people who *belong* to them," said Jeanne. "Of course it is—more romantic—

if they are also—a noble race," she said flushing proudly. "Is it snobbish to say so?"

"No, indeed," he said simply, "it is to me quite absurd to confound snobbishness with pride of race. To be glad you are born of men and women who have for generations been distinguished for gallantry, cultivation, fine persons, or that *gentillesse* which is the only true gentility—is mere common-sense. You could no more despise such a pedigree than a racing man despises the pedigree of a horse. Snobbishness, to my mind, consists in bearing oneself with more consideration towards one class of person than towards another; whereas the well-bred man would be equally courteous and well-behaved to all."

She listened very earnestly.

"Yes. Do you know, Cousin Denis, you talk a little like Louis, only more—more deliberately. Louis hurries out his words like a torrent. But your ideas are very like his."

"I do not profess to have originated them. They were the merest platitudes," he said, with that look of affectionate raillery she had learnt to associate with his gentle, semi-ironical tones.

"But it makes it plain," said Jeanne, proudly, "that the truly noble man *could* not be ashamed of the people who belonged to him, because they were"—with a sudden reminiscence of Cecilia—"at the other end of the social scale. In a way

I am as proud of Uncle Roberts—because he is so absolutely upright and independent, and because I *know* he would not do a wrong thing knowingly, or stoop to flatter anybody to save his life—as I am of any of my brave French ancestors, though he is a rough and homely man.”

“So you should be,” he said, with instant and warm approval.

“Oh, Cousin Denis, I remember a little girl who went to school with me in the village at Pen-y-waun; she was very clever, and won scholarships and became a teacher, and we heard that she passed her own father, who was a labourer, in the streets of Tref-goch and would not recognise him. She was ashamed of him! I cried when I heard it, but I was younger then and cried very easily, I suppose. It seemed so dreadful.”

“Yes, it was dreadful; and still more dreadful to think of that girl being a teacher; simply because she had passed a certain examination, and at an age when the realities of life are mere words, and experience and wisdom almost *nil*,—” said Denis, rather sadly, “I have wondered sometimes why poor ladies do not turn their attention to village schools. It would surely be a happier life than governessing, or companioning cross old women, and living in other people’s houses.”

“The schoolmistress at Pen-y-waun gets eighty pounds a year,” said Jeanne, “she could rent a cottage and garden for four or five pounds;

and would have the dearest little home in the prettiest country in the world."

"I suppose she could live on that," said the Duke, who was not a practical housekeeper.

Jeanne, who was, opened her eyes in astonishment.

"If she could n't live on thirty shillings a week, and put by—" she said, indignantly, "she would be a very helpless creature, Cousin Denis, don't you think?"

"I am rather ignorant of such details," he confessed, "but only too eager to learn. And I was thinking principally of the children. They are so easily influenced at that age, and would learn so quickly to distinguish between being genteel and gentle; and thus discover the piteous vulgarity of *pretence*, which is the terrible stumbling-block in this country."

"The only thing is," said Jeanne, thoughtfully, "whether a lady would not be too finicking to care to do for herself?"

He fathomed her meaning with an effort.

"If she were *fine*," he said, rather disdainfully, "she would not belong to the class from which I would have her taken. Fineness is the characteristic of the middle classes. The upper and lower are, naturally, destitute of it, and that is why they usually sympathise when they meet."

"Yes, I see what you mean—a queen can sit and talk to an old peasant woman quite simply,

and without affectation—but that is because each knows her place in the world, and has no occasion for pretence, whereas—”

“The burgomaster’s wife would make the peasant—and the Queen, feel very uncomfortable,” he said, laughing.

“I do not know what a burgomaster’s wife is!”

“Well—the mayor’s lady.”

“The butcher’s wife at Tref-goch is the worst,” said Jeanne, gravely. She had a door knocked out in the back wall, because she would not be seen coming out of her own shop.”

They had tea together in the twilight, for the days were now beginning to lengthen; and after tea, the Duke played to Jeanne; and she sat by the fire, and dreamt of Louis, and of the changes that his return must ensure.

Would not he leave the army now that he was so rich? He must surely have done his share of soldiering. But she had not dared to suggest this course to him in her letters.

Perhaps he would buy back, if it were possible, the old French property in the Boulonnais, as they had talked of doing, long ago, in their childish plans together.

Perhaps—for Mr. Valentine had hinted that this, too, lay within the power of the great fortune Miss Marney had bequeathed to Louis—he would rebuild Orsett, and settle down in the West Country.

Would he be very much altered? His letters did not seem to suggest it, though she was conscious of more reserve in them than formerly. He spoke less of himself and his wishes and his plans for the future, and more of his work.

She thought and thought of Louis,—but of her cousin Denis, playing softly in the firelight, on poor Miss Marney's new piano, beneath her old gilt harp—she scarcely thought at all.

His perfect self-possession and friendliness had banished altogether the embarrassment which Cecilia's insinuations had provoked.

She rested contentedly in his presence, and enjoyed his companionship, with all the gratitude that the remembrance of her loneliness before his advent, could inspire.

He longed, yet feared, to disturb this happy unconsciousness.

"It is too soon," thought the Duke; but he too, was dreaming of happiness to come, as he played on and on, in the warm, spring-scented room; and watched the pointed shadows cast by her downcast black lashes upon Jeanne's face, which glowed in the clear red light of the dying fire.

CHAPTER XV

THE BUSH DESERT

"But my heart will still be with you
Wherever you may go,
Can you look me in the face
And say the same, Jeannot?"

"*Rakhan. . . . marched twenty-eight miles on Tuesday and forty-two on Wednesday, horses twenty-four hours without water. . . .*" wrote Louis in a letter which Jeanne received at the end of March, and which had been scribbled in blue pencil on pages of his pocket-book torn out, and enclosed in a 'soldier's and seaman's' envelope.

"*. . . . We got off the track once, and were faced pretty suddenly with the real meaning of waterless desert; when a few hours may put an end to a whole party, big or small. . . . pretty well cooked when we arrived, but somebody luckily had a flask of brandy which was mixed with some stinking water and devoured, and we slept as we could in a hastily constructed zareba. . . . This is a burning rocky bush desert. . . . when we are all collected I expect some of us will be sent to Berbera; about a*

hundred and twenty miles through dense bush, and it is believed no water. But think of me slowly, slowly trekking towards you, and when I get home, my Jeannie dear, meet me, oh meet me with a brimming bucket of fresh sparkling ice-cold water from the mountain stream at Coed-Ithel; for here it is sometimes green and sometimes grey, but always loathsome to taste and smell. I am very well, my darling little Jeannette, and only just miss enjoying myself; but of course it's rather a bore to be always fighting the water-trouble instead of the Mullah. . .

" . . . Moved our pitch yesterday. The camping ground is a stony glaring treeless place, and the heat by day is very great. The ground gets red-hot. The wall of our zareba is made of cut thorn bush, and branches laced with barbed wire. I have a jolly little day shelter here of camel mats, but at night it is preferable to be in the open, and enjoy all the cool air one can get. . . . I am of course, glad to have had this little experience and, to have seen something of a new country; but I cannot help doubting whether God ever made a more uninteresting spot, or one less designed for human habitation."

A later letter,—in a worn little blue cover that told its own tale, and which bore the inscription "*On active service, Somaliland, no stamps available,*"—arrived by the same post, and was dated from Galkayu.

“ . . . I awoke in the cool and dusty night, (we have lately been afflicted with dust-storms)—and heard a little commotion of some one arriving in the zareba. In the light of the full moon I saw a few people moving about, which was unusual at 1.30 a.m. Then heard a voice announce the arrival of five mailbags. I awoke again at 5 with the feelings of a child on Christmas morning, wondering what would be in my stocking. Do people at home half realise, I wonder, the desperate eagerness with which one waits and hopes for letters? You do at any rate, and how I bless you, my Jeannie, for so faithfully writing.

“I got your letters forwarded from South Africa, and three later ones, all together. Why on earth should you trouble your dear anxious head over the preachments of ancient servants? There can be no possible reason why this poor lame Duke of Monaghan, whom you describe so pathetically, (or any other man with whom you are acquainted by this time) should not call upon you, now that you have a house to receive them in. I knew his brother at Sandhurst, Lord Dermot Liscarney, one of the best fellows I ever met, and a first-class bat; and I saw a good deal of him in South Africa, one way and another also. In fact we were rather specially friendly; but I had no idea we were in any way related. I’ve sent him a line to-day, for he wrote me an awfully nice letter when he heard I was coming here, which I’m ashamed to say I never

answered. It was very nice of the old Duchess to have asked you to her party; don't let all this magnificence turn my little Jeanne into a fine lady, or I shan't know her when I do see her. . . . I sometimes get into rather a rotten mood, as everybody in these circumstances must now and then, and feel I'd chuck this old show and every hope of promotion I've got in the world, for a single glimpse of those I love best. . . ."

Jeanne was jealous for a moment that Louis could thus speak in the plural, and mention, as it were, his love for her in the same breath as his affection for Uncle Roberts and Granny Morgan, and his countless school and army friends. "It is something quite different—apart from all the rest, and above it," she reflected, with a sigh that Louis should even seem to see this less clearly than she did.

"I've had a very nice letter from old Valentine. He seems to tumble to my notions about saving you all the trouble he can, and supplying you and me with more oof than we could possibly spend. Not that money is of any use to me here. Heavens! what untold gold one would gladly exchange for a bottle of Bass, or a single tumbler of fresh ice-cold—but I will not hark back to the water question, of which you must be heartily sick. . . . To return to our family lawyer! Vast sums, in excess of my

wildest hopes, have been placed to my credit at Cox's by this kind accommodating old boy; who has further taken charge of all papers, etc., of mine, deposited there, in accordance with my directions; so now, in any emergency, my Jeannie, you have some one to turn to. . . . I gather from your letters that you are a little disappointed at the comparative calm with which I appeared to receive the astounding—the overwhelming news of our great-aunt's munificence; but it was next to impossible to convey my breathlessness in my letters, and I have likewise been a pauper so long that I am perfectly unable to realise the change. Only wait till I get home, and am able to prove to myself that it is real, by handing over your share to your own safe-keeping, and playing ducks and drakes with the rest! No, no, I have grown older and wiser, and you shall not have to reproach me any more for unjustifiable extravagance. Still it must be great agony to you, my poor careful Jeanne, to reflect what a lot of money the upkeep of your fine house must cost; and if you don't have a good time in it, I'll never forgive you! Seriously, the relief to me is so great—and would have been with a hundredth part of what our kind relative has showered upon us that I catch myself laughing hilariously whenever I remember what has befallen. . . .

“ . . . Yesterday one of the men gave me an ostrich's egg,—such a delicious change! I made an omelette and seven of us ate heartily of it; about

equal to twenty hen's eggs. The men find a good many patrolling. I rather hope to shoot a good ostrich or two myself, though what I could do with the plumes unless we made panaches of them, I don't know! Still then I might cry with dear Cyrano whom you won't read—that there is one thing I will present

'sans une tache . . .

Quand j'entrerai chez Dieu . . .

. . . c'est mon panache!'

. . . God bless you, for ever, my darling sister. The photo of your dear little round face rests ever in my haversac—I must go to work. . . ."

Jeanne wrote long, long letters in answer to these, though she prayed that her brother might be on the way home before they could reach him.

She made every preparation she could think of, for his return; but beyond working almost feverishly at her French studies, and the arrangement of his room, there was not much for her to do.

Mrs. Dunham now began to refer very frequently to the Captain, as she preferred to call Louis, talking of him as though she had known him all her life.

"There 'll be a deal to settle when the Captain comes home, ma'am. He 'll have to decide whether to keep on us old servants or not."

"Oh Mrs. Dunham, you little know him, if

you could suppose he would turn you out of the house you have served so long and so faithfully."

"Yes'm," said Dunham briefly, accepting Jeanne's consolation as well-meant, but inadequate. "But it's not so much the gentleman these things depend on, as the lady."

"But I should be very sorry if you went, Mrs. Dunham,"

"It's not you, ma'am, as I'm alluding to," said Dunham, rather pityingly, "but the Captain's lady; you must look to see him get married when he comes home to settle down."

"Not just yet, I hope," Jeanne's smile was a very faint one. "I have not seen him for five years, Mrs. Dunham. I could not spare him to a wife just yet."

"No, ma'am, mothers and sisters generally feels that way. My own brother married as poor a creature as never was—though dead and gone these twenty years, poor thing, and him too. But a young gentleman like the Captain, ma'am, and so handsome and all, does n't get left long, Miss Jane, as a rule."

"I suppose not," said Jeanne, with a sigh.

"If you'd seen an old family die out as I have, Miss Jeanne, you'd welcome the day," said Dunham, solemnly. "Never a word would you hear no more against marriage *or* its consequences."

She was too discreet to breathe a word concerning Jeanne's own prospects; but the whole

household was now agreed that the Duke was coming a wooing, for he visited 99 Grosvenor Square as punctually as the man who came to wind up the clocks.

It was Dunham who suggested to Jeanne, (who would not have dared to originate such a proposal) that she might with propriety relax the outward signs of mourning for her great-aunt, now that three months had elapsed since her demise; and appear in white, or violet, according to her taste.

The love of romance which lurks in almost every spinster's bosom, dictated this suggestion of Dunham's, rather than any forgetfulness of her beloved mistress.

As Hewitt busied himself (more reckless of cost than ever) in rendering the morning-room a perfect bower of spring blossom, that the background of courtship might not be wanting, so did the old woman lie awake at night plotting and planning white muslins, mauve chiffons, and violet velvet; as suitable at once to maiden modesty and ducal dignity.

"He is only waiting for her brother to come home," she thought; and the whole household was of the same mind.

The irreproachable character of the suitor—the poverty of his exchequer—the wildness of his brothers—all these facts were perfectly well-known to the aged and unsuspected guardians

of the lonely lady's interests; and she was at a loss to account for the daily increasing deference with which she was now treated.

Few of the family secrets of the great are unknown to gentlemen of Hewitt's profession; and his friend and crony, the solemn major-domo of the Duchess's house in Park Lane, was as well aware as Hewitt himself how often his Grace went to tea at No. 99 Grosvenor Square.

But that his Grace was loved, and his Grace's mother very heartily disliked, by her household, the news would assuredly, through her maid, have come to the august ears of the Duchess. But as it was, there was not a scullion in the ducal establishment who would have thwarted the Duke's pleasure to please his mamma; and Denis pursued his tranquil way without a suspicion of the interest with which his comings and goings were regarded.

He met Jeanne walking in the Park, on a sunny afternoon in early April, as he was passing Grosvenor Gate, and wondering whether it were too soon to call upon her again.

For the first time, he turned and walked with her.

Dunham fell behind respectfully, devoting her attention to the breathless waddling Yorkshire terrier; and congratulating herself that her young lady was wearing her new white gown.

Jeanne's dress was simple enough, but the Duke had never seen her hitherto, in anything approaching fashionable attire; and much as he had appreciated her simplicity, the fact that a pretty woman is prettier when she is well dressed, came home to him rather forcibly.

The white cloth gown fitted her full slender figure closely, and she wore violets at her pretty white throat and in her shady black hat.

"I am very glad to meet you, Cousin Denis, for I have had a letter from the Duchess, and I want to ask you about it."

Now the Duchess was down at Challonsleigh, at this moment, and Denis was keeping house in Park Lane by himself, so that this intelligence startled him very much.

Jeanne explained.

"It is a very kind letter; asking me to go and stay with her for Easter; and I think it must be because Louis knew your brother, Lord Dermot Liscarney, at Sandhurst, for Louis said in his last letter that he had written to him. Do you think I ought to go?"

She wondered why he was so slow to answer.

He was looking away from her when his reply came, in words even more carefully measured than usual.

"There can be no possible reason why you should not go."

"But shall you be there?" she asked wistfully.

"I should be afraid to go if you were not there. Even with you to help me I am afraid I might make many mistakes and do ridiculous things without meaning to."

The Duke's face cleared, and he spoke with more boyish heartiness than was his wont.

"Of course I shall be there; and you could not be ridiculous if you tried."

"But ought n't I just to explain to the Duchess that I was brought up in a farmhouse, so that she should know what to expect," said scrupulous Jeanne. "After all, I have never stayed anywhere in my life, except in Pen-y-waun Rectory when it was too wet to go backwards and forwards to Coed-Ithel. And I know that that would not be at all the same kind of life."

"You can tell her when you get there, if you like, and if the opportunity arises. But there is not the slightest necessity for doing so. And I should say nothing about it in my letter; and simply write an ordinary note of acceptance."

"But I don't know even how to write an ordinary note of acceptance. I thought you would help me," she said ingenuously.

He looked at his watch.

"Then we ought to go and do it at once, if we are to catch the country post."

They walked slowly down Upper Grosvenor Street, Jeanne considerably moderating her pace to suit the halting footsteps of her companion.

Dunham followed them solemnly—a model of discreet chaperonage, keeping close to her young lady's heels, and faithfully leading Miss Marney's little dog.

The invitation had come about in the simplest manner, through the letter which Louis had written to Lord Dermot, and exactly as Jeanne had surmised.

Dermot was his mother's favourite son, and his lightest suggestions met with more attention than his elder brother's ceremonious requests.

Thus, although the Duchess had demurred when Denis had asked her to leave a card at 99 Grosvenor Square, on a young lady whom he declared to be a relative; and made a favour of promising eventually to do as he wished in the matter—she yet despatched an Easter invitation to Jeanne, without raising any difficulties at all, on receiving her son Dermot's laconic explanation.

"I've heard from a pal of mine—an awfully decent fellow—name de Courset. It appears he's a connection of ours. His sister came to one of Monaghan's musical shows, he says, I suppose you know her?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember her, my dear boy," said the Duchess, shaking her head, "you know what shoals of people Denis makes me ask to his concerts."

"Well she lives in Grosvenor Square—his ship

appears to have come in—an old aunt has left him all her money—I believe he has nobody but this one sister belonging to him.”

“Grosvenor Square,” said the Duchess, “oh, then I *do* remember; for it was at our own old house that Denis insisted on my leaving a card. Yes. He met her at the Whelers, and found out she was connected somehow.”

The whole incident of Jeanne’s call upon Mrs. Wheler, or as much of it as she had witnessed, together with the subsequent introduction of Jeanne to herself, had long ago vanished from the mind of the Duchess.

“Well, I wish you ’d ask her down to Challonsleigh, mother. It would save my having to go and call. I ’ve no use for calls. And I know the poor chap would like it. He ’s one of *the* most decent fellows I ever met,” said Dermot, repeating the highest terms of praise his vocabulary contained. “One of my very best pals. I ’d no idea he was a cousin.”

“Cousin, nonsense,” said the Duchess, “I suppose they are related to old Miss Marney who bought the house from us. She was a distant cousin, I believe. A most disagreeable woman, very stuck up but enormously rich. I only met her once and I took a dislike to her instantly. Your poor father wanted me to go and see her, I remember, but nothing would have induced me to set foot in the house again at that time.

I got it into my head it was an unlucky house; everything went wrong in it. The old Duke left every penny he could away from your father; you nearly died of the measles; and it all culminated in your brother's accident."

"I ain't superstitious, except perhaps, about racing," said Dermot.

"If Miss Marney left this young man her money as well as the house—" said the Duchess, pursuing another train of thought, "he must be uncommonly wealthy."

"I daresay," said Dermot.

"And he has only this one sister?"

"So he says. She must be pretty sick over this Somaliland business. It looks rotten. I hope he'll get safe through, poor chap," said Dermot. "I'm afraid it's not much of a picnic, though, by all accounts."

"Is he out there?" said the Duchess. "I'll ask her down for Easter. What did you say was her name?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE DUCHESS

THE afternoon sunshine brightened the dead moor, and the golden gorse blazed against a deep blue April sky and scudding, dazzling, white clouds.

The hedge-rows were putting forth young leaves, and the baby oaks hardly yet uncrumpling faint yellow foliage, above the clumps of primroses and the patches of blue violets which here and there lightened the dry banks.

The ducal carriage skirted the open moorland on the one side, and the tall hedge-row on the other, and Jeanne seated alone within it, drank the fresh delicious air through the open window.

Dunham followed decorously in a fly with the luggage.

She had smiled outright, for the first time since her lady's death, when Jeanne had communicated to her the fact of the invitation. A small, difficult, sour smile, but still a smile of secret pleasure and triumph, though her immediate comment had sounded to Jeanne extremely irrelevant.

"I daresay William will take care of the little dog. I would n't trust Hewitt. His memory is that unreliable nowadays."

"Why, Mrs. Dunham, what can my invitation have to do with the little dog?"

"We can't take him, ma'am. I should n't advise it. Some people are very fidgetty about having dogs on a visit."

"Do you mean—were you thinking—of coming with me?" said Jeanne, with a sinking heart.

"Of course it 's as you wish, ma'am. If you would prefer another maid, I 've nothing to say," said Dunham, stiffly.

"I never thought of such a thing. Must I take a maid? Of course if any one comes, it must be you," said Jeanne, much flurried. "But the Duchess says nothing about it in her letter." She referred anxiously to the scrawled and coronetted sheet of note-paper.

"How should her Grace mention such a thing, ma'am," said Dunham, in withering tones. "It would be as much a matter of course to her to take a maid as a brush and comb. But it 's not much as you allow me to do for you, Miss Jane; and of course I 'm getting old—"

"Oh Mrs. Dunham, don't," cried her simple lady, almost in tears. "You know very well I have never been used to maids. Why should we pretend otherwise, just you and me? I have always done everything for myself. It 's not

that I don't value and respect you—you know it is n't," her voice faltered—"though I make many mistakes."

"You 'll make far less, ma'am, begging your pardon, with me on the watch," said Dunham, softening. "Nor I can't see as you make many neither, only you 're that doubtful of yourself. But 't is no novelty for me to stay in big houses, ma'am, for when Miss Marney was young, she was always a-visiting about, and took a footman with her besides a maid, as a matter of course. If you won't think it a liberty, Miss Jane, I could very well put you in the way of a lot of little things as you could hardly be expected to know of yourself, as one might say."

"Of course I should be only very grateful to you if you would," said Jeanne; and she thought that the increased consideration which Dunham now displayed towards her, denoted that the old woman was growing fond of her at last.

"With Mrs. Dunham on the watch upstairs, and Cousin Denis downstairs," she reflected, "I should think I can hardly go much amiss after all."

Nevertheless she was not a little anxious as the carriage turned into the park.

Here the rolling slopes of emerald green, alternating with bare brown patches of shaven bracken,—were crowned with great spreading oaks, and giant elms, casting long shadows across the turf.

The white road gleamed in the sunshine, the deep waters of a lake lay still and glassy, reflecting newly-leaved bushes, and motionless dead stems.

Oh, earth, how beautiful and how silent, thought little Jeanne; for here it was the over-crowded and noisy city that seemed to her remote and dream-like.

The silence ended as the carriage drew up before the house; of which the main entrance, rather curiously, was at the back, within view of extensive stables and kennels, and a newly built red-tiled tennis-court.

Jeanne was now ushered round tall Spanish leather screens, which sheltered the entrance to the outer vestibule—into an immense oak-pannelled hall, where a tea-table was drawn up before a huge fire of burning logs. Various people were seated around, talking and laughing, as it seemed, at the top of their voices; and several large boar-hounds were lying or standing about in picturesque attitudes.

The Duchess was so unlike the fashionable velvet-clad long-trained personage of Jeanne's recollection, that she hardly recognised her hostess, who advanced to meet her with outstretched hands, and a very kind smile of welcome.

She now wore a short and scanty skirt of battered mud-splashed tweed that barely reached

her ankles; a loose, open, baggy coat of the same material, which caused her rotund figure to look perfectly shapeless; and a knitted tam-o'-shanter perched on her grey hair above her ruddy healthy countenance.

"The Rector's wife would never have been seen in such a gown," said poor Jeanne, afterwards describing the appearance of the Duchess to Dunham.

"Don't you mind thinking of the Rector's wife," advised the cautious Dunham. "Forget her and all her ways. Watch her Grace, ma'am; or since her Grace is a bit eccentric, watch the other ladies here. The fashions is changed, no doubt, since me and my poor lady stayed about, but what they does, is right."

"Some were dressed like the Duchess; and some in beautiful long flowing robes of lace and pale colours like evening dresses only not cut low; and one or two in riding habits"; said poor Jeanne, hopelessly confused. "And one or two of the gentlemen in boots and breeches."

"They 'll have come in from hunting and taken a cup of tea before going to change," said Dunham, "and the ones in their tea-gowns *has* changed; and the others very like been walking late. I wish I had thought to get you a tea-gown, but it seemed to me you was too young," said the anxious old woman, "but I 'll pick up all I can in the Room, ma'am, you may depend."

Jeanne knew not what the Room might be, but she placed implicit reliance on her faithful attendant.

The Duchess introduced Jeanne to the three ladies and the two dogs nearest the tea-table, and then said, "I believe you know my son," in her loud and cheerful voice, but with very little idea, as Denis shook hands with her visitor, how very well acquainted they were.

"Where 's Dermot; it is Dermot who knows your brother so well; but he shall take you in to dinner to-night," said the Duchess. "By the bye, I hope you have good news of your brother; he 's in Somaliland, is n't he?" and the Duchess turned her attention to somebody else, without waiting for Jeanne's answer.

The tea was bitter with long standing, and the buttered toast so cold that old Granny Morgan would have thrown it into the fire before presenting it to a guest; but Jeanne reflected that great ladies cannot be expected to understand such details; and decided,—as she ate and drank, in the utmost alarm, everything that was set before her,—that the tales she had heard of the carelessness of servants in large houses, must be only too true.

Having finished her tea, and scorched the side of her face next the roaring log-fire, to a perfectly crimson hue—she was invited to inspect

her room, and the Duchess led her thither herself with great kindness of manner, talking all the time in her loud authoritative gabble, and never waiting for an answer; a habit which occasionally relieved her hearers of embarrassment, for her questions were often inconvenient.

"So you live all by yourself in your great house. You must be very dull. But I daresay you have plenty of visitors—" Here Jeanne would fain have told her that the Duke of Monaghan was her only visitor, but the Duchess gave her no time, and she was too frightened to interrupt. "It was always on my conscience that I never called upon your aunt, as *my* dear Duke wished me to do—" thus she alluded to her departed husband,—“but you know my son's accident, which happened there, made me declare I would never enter that house again. So you must n't think it unfriendly if I never do. The resolution was taken, you see, before you were born or thought of. Why you can't be twenty." Jeanne tried to interpolate a correct statement of her age, but the Duchess had flown to another subject, as her custom was, pursuing her own train of thought undisturbed. "I suppose you have a companion. Companions are great bores. I had one for a time, but she had neuralgia so badly I was glad to see the last of her. It was quite depressing," (here the Duchess laughed heartily) "whenever I wanted

her I was always told she had just taken anti-pyrin. And of course you know one must not stir till the effects of that have passed off. So bad for the heart. I hope you never drug yourself. However, I am told every one does, nowadays. I never touch anything of the kind. Here is your room. Now do make yourself quite comfortable and at home, and look upon me as a mother all the time you're here, my dear, for I'm very fond of chaperoning girls, never having had daughters of my own."

Jeanne was quite astonished at so much kindness, but before she had time to utter her gratitude, the great lady was already speeding away down the passage, calling to her favourite boar hound, who had followed her up-stairs with stately velvet tread.

The bark of the Duchess, it was always said, was worse than her bite; but she barked so loud and so long, that a bite might have been more easily endured. Thus, though she was in no sense, a bad-hearted woman, but on the contrary a very kind one, she was unpopular among her father's people and on her own estate; where her kindnesses were received so thanklessly that she might be almost excused for forming a poor opinion of her tenants' capacity for gratitude.

But a sharp tongue may inflict wounds that cod-liver oil, chicken broth, and port wine cannot cure; nor do coals and blankets necessarily warm

hearts chilled and offended by fault-finding carried to excess; so that whilst her sons, and more especially Lord Dermot, who was to inherit her property, were exceedingly popular at Châlonsleigh,—their mother, who had been born and bred there, was at once disliked and feared, to an extent of which she was, happily, very little aware.

Dunham had paused in her unpacking, and made her old-fashioned curtsey as her Grace entered the apartment, receiving a good-natured nod in reply; and the Duchess was in high good humour as she stumped away to her own rooms.

She hated smart, self-assertive young ladies, and pert independent maids; but Jeanne's maid was ancient and respectable to such a degree that her mere appearance was a voucher for her mistress, and Jeanne herself was timid and gentle as could be wished, whilst she evidently preferred listening to her elders, to talking herself.

The Duchess asked no more of a young woman than that she should be respectable, retiring, and rich; and she decided that Jeanne possessed all these recommendations to her favour.

She questioned her son regarding the riches, to make sure; but as she answered her own questions the Duke did not feel it incumbent upon him to correct her, though he knew very well that if his mother discovered later that she was

wrong in any of her assumptions, she would blame him for her mistake.

"Oh, Mrs. Dunham, have you ever seen a prettier room?" cried Jeanne, the moment she was left alone with her maid.

"Dear yes, ma'am; but I wish you could remember to call me plain Dunham, and be done with it. I'm sure I don't know what her Grace would think to hear you."

"I will, I will indeed, Dunham," said Jeanne, obedient though crestfallen.

"Our spare rooms at Orsett was far finer than this, though of course, you being an unmarried lady would n't be given one of the best. Still, one can't keep London bedrooms fresh and sweet and lavender-scented like this, and I could almost think myself back at the old place," said Dunham, sighing as she looked round the pleasant spacious country bedroom; with its chintz curtained four-poster, white Dresden chimney ornaments, and the fresh daffodils on the muslin draped toilet-table.

The big mullioned windows looked on to a stretch of wild park, over which a herd of deer was quietly moving; and through the bare branches of distant woodlands, blue hills were faintly to be discerned.

"It is so peaceful and so beautiful," Jeanne said. She leaned out of the open window, to

enjoy the last long rays of the afternoon sunshine, and cool her hot cheeks; and her thoughts flew to the burning desert which held her brother captive, far from this fresh and fragrant English country.

Louis had always loved the spring-time; and his letters from India and from Africa had yearly breathed forth his longings and his regrets.

"Oh God, send him safely back to me," prayed little Jeanne, "but I must n't think of him now, or I shall cry, and he would want me to look my best, and do him honour."

A servant presently brought a tray full of sprays of hothouse flowers to the door, and Jeanne chose some heliotrope and maidenhair fern to wear with her white gown.

"Can't I help you, Mrs.—I mean Dunham," she ventured to say, as the old woman folded and unfolded, and sorted and arranged the clothes of her own choosing, with heartfelt pride.

"No, Miss Jane, that is one of the things you must n't do. You should be lying down on the sofa, ma'am, and reading a book; or taking a doze and getting yourself as fresh as you can, to look well when you're dressed. That's what ladies ought to do at this hour."

"But I am not tired."

"You will be, ma'am, for they'll sit up hours later than you're accustomed to. Dinner at half past eight, and they seldom sits down, I

hear, till nearly nine. And there you 'll have to be, smiling away as if you never wanted to go to bed again," Dunham anxiously instructed her. "Not to mention that you 'd be out of my way on the sofa, ma'am."

Jeanne obediently reposed herself upon the sofa, in preparation for being tired presently; but the interval between the dressing-gong and the dinner hour being shorter than Dunham expected, she was obliged, in the end, to hurry over her toilette; and only just missed being late after all.

As she went down-stairs she endeavoured to sustain her failing courage by dwelling upon reflections calculated to allay nervousness, and inspire heroism.

"One can only live a minute at a time—a minute at a time. . . . I have but to sit still and watch what other people do. . . . It is not my dinner this time, thank heaven. . . . I got over my first interview with the Duchess very well. 'Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.'" Jeanne was proud of her French, and this quotation brought her triumphantly to the first broad landing, which was decked with hothouse plants, and hung with frowning portraits of ducal ancestors.

"My frock is like a dream, but I cannot think it is I inside it. . . . Oh that I may not disgrace it by my behaviour. . . . I cannot remember

the names of any of the people I was introduced to, but Cousin Denis said I must not repeat people's names when I am talking to them, so perhaps they will not find out I have forgotten. . . . Jeanne—Marie—Charlotte de Courset, is this being worthy of your forefathers? . . . Would Anne-Marie, Chanoinesse, Comtesse de l'insigne chapitre noble de Bourbourg, have gone to the guillotine shaking at the knees like this?" This outburst of noble indignation brought her to the foot of the grand staircase; where a liveried giant, in powder and knee-breeches, stood in the now deserted hall, and affably indicated the suite of ante-rooms which led to the saloon where the party was assembled.

"Worst come to the worst," thought Jeanne, in desperation. "I can but leave the house early to-morrow morning, before any one is up," and with this last consoling reflection she entered the drawing-room.

She looked so much younger than her actual age that her very apparent shyness was more becoming than awkward, and evoked fresh approval from the Duchess; who as soon as she espied, through her glasses, the timid entry of Jeanne, made haste to introduce her son Dermot, who was to take his friend's sister in to dinner.

"I daresay I shall have Cousin Denis on the other side, and I must not forget that this is

Louis's friend," thought Jeanne, faintly, as she took the tall young man's proffered arm.

But as she was the least important person in the room, she found herself almost at the other end of the long table, from the Duke of whose fair head she caught only occasional glimpses across the bowers of spring blossom and the massive gold plate with which the festive board was laden.

But Dermot, whose native shyness was scarcely less overpowering than her own, though he had plenty of experience to counter-balance it—spoke of Louis; and the ice was not only broken, but actually thawed, in a moment.

Her bright little face—with its fresh red bloom of lip and cheek, and its long-lashed brown eyes, beautiful in shape and soft in expression—was turned towards her partner constantly. She listened with eager delight to the anecdotes of Louis; which, pleased with a success he seldom attained as a *raconteur*, the young man contrived to fish up from the depths of his memory.

He knew Louis well—had shared more than one scrape with him (but concerning this he was prudently silent)—and played cricket with him—been in action with him—and they were together in hospital at Kimberley.

"But he never told me he had been in hospital," said Jeanne.

"Lord bless you—we were in and out like

rabbits—probably forgot to mention it,” said the diplomatic Dermot.

“No—it was that he was afraid to make me anxious,” Jeanne said, with loyal admiration. But she did not like to think Louis could keep even so small a secret as this from her.

“He promised to tell me *everything*,” she thought.

“I was in, batting, with him once, at Sandhurst, when he took his century against some local team or other,” said Dermot, omitting to mention his own almost equally fine performance on the same occasion. “Lord, how he made me run—he nearly killed me. I’m not so thin as he is,” and he laughed all over his broad fair face; a laugh so good-natured and so mirthful that Jeanne joined in it without knowing why.

But he was not obliged to spend more time than he liked in making conversation, for Jeanne was willing to talk of her brother, as she had been to listen to Lord Dermot’s reminiscences of Louis, so that he was enabled to devote himself for long periods, entirely to his dinner, which he did with great energy and appetite.

The gentleman on Jeanne’s other side, was afforded an excellent view of a thick knob of brown hair, and a very white and dimpled neck and shoulder; but he scarcely saw even the profile of his pretty neighbour; and no opportunity of addressing her was granted to him.

"Was it all right? Did I do well?" she asked the Duke, anxiously, after dinner.

"Perfectly," he said, encouragingly. "I hope you talked a little to Mr. Jermyn, who sat next you? He is such an interesting man, and a great friend of my own."

"I carefully never spoke to him," said poor Jeanne, in horror, "I thought I must not speak to anybody until I was introduced."

"Your neighbour at dinner is an exception," said the Duke, laughing at her dismay. "Never mind, you can make up for it to-morrow."

"Miss de Courset, come and play billiard fives," cried Lord Dermot, interrupting, "unless you are a bridger. Are you a bridger?"

As soon as she had learnt what was meant by the term, Jeanne assured him earnestly that she was not; and with a bright look of apology at Denis—for how was it possible to refuse the friend of Louis—she went off with Lord Dermot, and two or three of the younger members of the party, to be initiated into the mysteries of billiard fives.

The Duke walked to the piano in the now brilliantly lighted hall, and began to improvise; and a young lady who meant to marry him if she could, sat within his view, in a becoming attitude, and listened with rapt attention.

At the close of each movement, she hoped he would leave off playing, and come and talk

to her; but it invariably glided into another, until at last she gave up in despair and went away; not daring to interrupt him; for it was known that to be interrupted when he was making music was the one thing which ruffled the Duke's even temper.

His improvisations ended with a crash, when Jeanne returned from the billiard-room, with the rest of the players, all talking and laughing tumultuously.

She came straight to the piano, with flushed cheeks and brilliant eyes, smiling and joyous.

"Oh Cousin Denis, it was so delightful, I wish you had come, we had such fun."

"What have you done to your hand?"

"It is only a little bruise—" she held out a fair arm that shone through its veiling of white gauze, and showed him a blue mark on her wrist; "Lord Dermot would tie a handkerchief round it, but it is nothing at all."

Dermot came and stood beside her, towering over her, and smiling fatuously as he pulled at the flaxen down which shaded his upper lip.

"Billiard fives can be an abominably rough game. You should have taken better care of her," said Denis, and the brothers' glances met over Jeanne's unconscious bent brown head as she examined her bruise.

The one pair of blue eyes was angry; the other astonished.

Dermot noted the unusual sternness of the Duke's low voice, and observed the pallor of his face; and suddenly recalling Jeanne's innocent references to his brother's visits in Grosvenor Square—a light broke in upon his mind.

"It does n't hurt a bit, you know," said Jeanne, looking into the Duke's face, "and we won, which was all that mattered."

The Duchess remarked the group at the piano, as she presently entered the hall, (in the best of spirits, for she had won five shillings on the evening) and she smiled her most agreeable smile, as the work of distributing the flat candles began, distinguishing Jeanne with especial notice as the ladies proceeded to mount the grand staircase; and bidding her good-night at her own door.

"It has all gone off very well, indeed, Dunham," said Jeanne, greeting the old woman, who awaited her by the blazing fire in her own room. "And I don't think I ever enjoyed myself so much in my life."

"I'm sure I'm very glad to hear it, ma'am," said Dunham, affably, "and you looked very well, Miss Jane, for me and some of the other maids was standing up there in the dark gallery, and peeping down at you all in the hall when you came out of dinner."

"You should not have waited up for me. I could have managed very well for myself."

"I hope I know my work better than that 'm,

though returning you many thanks for the kind thought," said Dunham. But her tone was still more deferential; for had she not heard her young lady requested to look upon her Grace as a mother, and was it for her to be finding fault with a possible future Duchess?

What had seemed like rustic ignorance on the part of Jeanne, would soon appear mere gracious consideration for her inferiors; and Dunham prepared herself to regard with respectful indulgence the eccentricities of one who had found favour in the eyes of a Duke.

In the meantime Lord Dermot and his elder brother found space and opportunity for a few words together, and alone.

"I only ask for fair play, Dermot. If you are in earnest, you have as much right as I—if not, for God's sake, let her alone," said the Duke, with white lips.

"The poor old chap must be balmy, absolutely balmy,—to go on like this," thought his astonished brother; but aloud he said, in much the same soothing tones he would have adopted towards a lunatic.

"My dear old fellow, don't be an ass. I never set eyes on the girl before in the whole course of my existence. I ask you, is it likely?"

"There is such a thing as love at first sight," said the Duke, sternly.

Dermot dared not smile.

"To be sure there is," he said, good-humouredly.
"But I solemnly swear—"

"Don't," said the Duke, who had heard many such asseverations on other subjects from the same lips, and was no longer impressed. "I only spoke out like this, Dermot," he said simply, "Because it appears to me it would be foolish to throw away my own happiness, and perhaps—who knows—(in a lower tone) *hers*, for want of a word between you and me, who have always more or less understood each other."

"It would be simply tommy-rot," said Dermot, translating the Duke's measured words into the emphatic language best understood of himself; and he helped himself with emotion to his third whiskey and soda since dinner.

"I don't think you are the fellow to let a few days' idle—I hate the word—flirtation,—come between you and me; it would n't be worth it," said the Duke. "But she's very young, or at least she's very inexperienced, which comes to the same thing, and—and—but mind, Dermot, I'm not asking any kind of sacrifice from you, if—if it's with you as it is with me. In that case we'll shake hands over it, and let the best man win."

"But my dear old chap, it is n't," almost shouted Dermot, "I give you my word, such an idea never even entered my head. I'll leave

the house to-morrow morning if you wish, with the greatest pleasure in life."

"No, no—"

"Well—anyway, here's luck to your wooing," said Dermot with the enthusiasm born of whiskey. "Have you thought what our parent will say when she gets wind of it?"

"I don't mean her to get wind of it, until it's settled one way or the other."

"But she will—trust her for nosing it out." (The more especially if you give yourself away as you have done to-night, thought Dermot, but this to himself.)

"There is nothing for her to find out. Miss de Courset herself has no suspicion of my feelings, so naturally no one else has," said the infatuated young man, innocently.

"Well, well," said Dermot, as gravely as he could. "It's I who am responsible for her coming here; so it is I who will be blamed if the match isn't approved. I'm sure I don't care. Her Grace can say very little to me that she has n't said before, if it comes to that. A disreputable, idle, extravagant, thoughtless spendthrift, careless of the best interests of the family, etc."

"Dermot," said his brother, nervously, "I wish you would not speak as though it were a certainty. I have n't even—asked her, yet. And you forget that my personal disadvantages—"

"Bosh," said Dermot.

"Let me tell you that if you think she 'd marry me for any reason except—"

Dermot concealed a smile. "Poor Denis," he thought. "I suppose they 're always like that. However, in this case, perhaps his game leg makes him extra funky. What 's the good of all this shilly-shallying? Still if by any chance she did take it into her head to refuse him, I believe he 'd go clean off his chump."

This reflection caused him to ply his brother with excellent disinterested counsel.

"Look here, Denis,—" he said gravely, "I advise you—and you know I 've had lots of experience in these matters," interpolated the Lothario of twenty-four, "I advise you to go straight ahead and—and take her by storm, don't you know. There ain't any reason on earth why she *should 'nt* be fond of you—" he said awkwardly, "only—as she 's an uncommonly pretty girl—I 'll be hanged if she is n't—" he finished the whiskey and soda—"while you 're thinking about it, and mooning over your music and all that—some other fellow will cut in, and carry her off under your very nose, if you don't take care."

"I was always a bit of a muff, was n't I, Dermot?" said the Duke, in a tone of somewhat melancholy raillery. "Not the sort of fellow to take anything by storm."

Perhaps Dermot in his heart rather agreed

that his eldest brother was a bit of a muff; for he was not sufficiently cultivated himself to appreciate the cultivation of Denis, and occasionally mistook the gentleness and gravity born of suffering and solitude, for want of manliness.

But he was at once too good-natured and too fond of Denis, to have ever given utterance to his opinion; and he had no idea that the Duke had divined it.

He clapped his brother encouragingly upon the shoulder, and expressed both his sympathy and his affection as tersely as possible, in the emphatic utterance of his favourite monosyllable.

"Rot."

CHAPTER XVII

THE TELEGRAM

THERE are moments, perhaps, in most lives (but such periods are not to be measured by the clock), of vague but perfect happiness; enjoyed almost unconsciously at the time, yet looked back upon afterwards with wonder and envy.

Jeanne did not pause to ask herself why the days at Challonsleigh were so much happier than any other days her life had ever known; nor why the spring season, always a time of rejoicing, should this year be so riotously glad as to fill her heart with actual ecstasy as she walked in the sunshine, beneath a cloudless April sky, and gathered the scented white violets, and the yellow daffodils growing by thousands in the fields.

She tried her hand at golf, under the Duke's tuition; and being blessed with the luck that usually attends beginners, believed that she could play the game very fairly; she was driven to the meet, in the Duke's dog-cart, and with great wonder and admiration beheld the Duchess on her colossal steed, looking as trim as it was possible for a lady weighing fourteen stone to

look, in her close-fitting habit; she sat with the Duke, in the new tennis-court, and watched vigorous encounters between Dermot and Brian, evenly matched in the royal game, equally tall, active, and muscular; and she wondered that Cousin Denis could be so keenly and breathlessly interested as a mere looker-on.

She marvelled at the luxury of the stables, the number of the horses, the extensiveness of the kennels, and the perfection of the model farms on the estate, which appealed strongly to her own orderly instincts and practical experience.

The Duchess was fond of an outdoor life. When she was at home in the country she discarded her fine clothes, her curled white front, and her long handled glasses; and tramped about the grounds in all weathers, wearing a short tweed skirt, a billycock perched on her own grey hair, and a pair of spectacles which enabled her to see where she was going.

She carried always a stout walking stick, and was generally followed by half a dozen dogs besides her favourite boarhounds. She visited cottages, inspected the home farm, and examined the timber with untiring interest and energy.

But it was new to her to find a female companion who was as tireless as herself and a great deal more active, and who had an even more practical knowledge of subjects connected with stock, cider-making, and dairy-work.

She found fault (in her usual candid manner) with Jeanne's too elegant walking attire, and presented one of her own tweed skirts to her visitor (to Dunham's horror) which Jeanne gratefully accepted, as she did all the advice bestowed upon her by the Duchess, who was highly delighted by such docility.

Her fear of the Duchess vanished during the expeditions she made with her; tramping up steep, red, muddy roads, through coppices carpeted with primroses, down narrow stony lanes, and over springing mossy turf,—they became very nearly intimate.

The Duchess, to be sure, monopolized the chief part of the conversation, but the country was hilly, and the great lady was stout; going up-hill Jeanne had it all her own way.

Thus her Grace learnt the history of the French pedigree (which bored her excessively), and incidentally, the generous intentions of Louis; which she took breath to assure Jeanne (panting) were exactly what every one in the world would expect of him, and which could not consequently be thwarted; and this latter information interested her so much that she redoubled her kindness to her visitor, and pressed her to prolong her stay.

Habit doubtless inures human beings to all kinds of changes; but more swiftly to surroundings of luxury than of hardship. Jeanne soon learnt

to go in to dinner without trembling; and to order her own breakfast quite fearlessly every morning, from the *menu* handed to her as she entered the great dining-room, where every guest who breakfasted downstairs had his or her separate service, and special dish to order.

She retracted her hasty judgment of the bad management of large establishments, as she gained experience in the excellence of *cuisine*, and the perfect attention of the noiseless and well-trained servants.

Her simplicity saved her from the mortifications and difficulties that might have beset a lonely lady with a little more knowledge of the world, who found herself suddenly included in a large and fashionable party assembled for Easter in a country house.

But allusions that such a one might be striving to follow and understand—passed over her head with perfect innocuousness; and here ignorance was bliss indeed. It did not concern her for a moment that she could not join in the conversation when it turned on racing, as it often did, or on bridge, or on motoring, or the latest doings of the best known people in the land.

She knew as much about politics as about polo, and was perfectly contented to sit in her corner and listen, whilst others talked; or to withdraw her mind altogether from her surroundings, and dream of Louis.

Her modesty attracted the men of the party, and mollified the women; had the Duke and his mother monopolised her less, she might have made many friends.

As it was she saw the departure of most of the Easter guests, without any particular feelings of regret; and rather rejoiced at the diminished numbers of the party, which led to a certain increase of intimacy among those who remained.

Lord Dermot had turned his attentions (always inclined to be exclusive) to the young lady who had intended if she could to marry the Duke; and as she prudently reflected that after all, the younger brother would be the richer man of the two, she met his advances, as it seemed to the onlookers, rather more than half way; which resulted in a flirtation so very ardent and conspicuous that the Duchess hailed the return of her second son to his duties at Windsor with great relief.

Their devotion was so exaggerated that it excited open smiles, and Jeanne overhearing fragments of a conversation between two ladies who were intimate with one another, could not be ignorant of the subject to which they alluded.

"Will it come to anything, do you think?"

"Good heavens, no. He never stays in the same house a week without *almost* becoming engaged."

"He only just fled in time, then. I never saw any one so determined as she."

"She has met her match," said the first lady, shaking her head. "He will disappear to shoot lions or something—worst come to the worst."

"They generally go to the Rocky Mountains in cases of extremity," said the other.

Jeanne listened with indignation; but it was being gradually borne in upon her simple mind that size, strength, and comeliness of person, are not the only desirable qualities in mankind; and that the Duke suffered less than she could have supposed possible, by comparison with his brothers.

Lord Dermot,—loud and cheerful, ruddy and healthful, was obviously, to the merest looker-on, careless of everything in the world but his own pleasure; lustily ready to hunt, to shoot, or to make love, with equal zest; and young as he was, already dependent on constant fillips of whiskey.

Lord Brian, with an equally fine physique, and the same Saxon fairness, was at once heavier of build, and duller of intellect than his elder; and appeared to exist for the sole purpose of getting from one place to another as quickly as he possibly could; for he dreamt, thought, and spoke of nothing but motoring.

"But at least they are brave," thought Jeanne, wistfully, "for they both went to South Africa to fight for their country," but she could not help

feeling that when she had said that, she had said all.

She blushed at the memory of her earlier feelings for Cousin Denis; of her kindly pity, not unmingled with contempt, for his inferiority in appearance and strength to her idolised brother.

Was it possible that the difference of the setting in which she now beheld him, had helped to increase her respect for the Duke, so that she now regarded him with something very like reverence, mingled with her cousinly affection?

Jeanne blushed again, and with shame, at the very suspicion.

Yet human nature is undeniably subject to the influence of surroundings.

The quiet, lame young man, whose fair complexion was liable to such unfortunate variations of colour,—whose unassuming manners had caused her to forget her natural timidity,—and who never asserted his own opinions, nor contradicted those of other people, nor expressed strong likes and dislikes—had seemed to Jeanne, (accustomed to the more vigorous, or less well-governed, personality of Louis)—a very ordinary individual indeed. But the Duke, seated at the head of that great banqueting table, with its double row of well-bred, well-dressed guests, and its burden of hothouse blossoms and gold plate and wax lights—the Duke, limping through the

spacious hall, giving quiet orders in his low voice, to bowing and deferential servants of twice his own size, as a matter of course—the Duke riding through the deer park on his splendid chestnut horse—in short, the Duke at home, the head of a great house, and treated universally with respect as well as affection by those who had known him from childhood,—could no longer be regarded by a little country maiden as such a very unimportant young man, his lameness and his delicacy notwithstanding; and perhaps Jeanne would hardly have been human had she not come to look upon him in a totally new light.

“High or low, indoors or out, there’s not a living soul but has a good word for him,” reported Dunham, thus doubtless summarising the information she had been able to glean in the Room. “He’s spent the most of his money, they say, on his poor Irish tenants; but yet he always seems to have a something to spare. ’T was he as come to the Vicar’s help here, with the working man’s club, as her Grace would n’t put her hand in her pocket for; and he has built the tennis-court for his brothers. And nobody they says, from his childhood up—has ever heard a rough word from him, for all he suffered from his poor back and her Grace’s tantrums.”

The Duchess, although in no way gifted by any especial quickness of perception, was yet, being a woman and a mother, enabled to divine

the sentiments with which Denis regarded her young visitor, before Jeanne had been twenty-four hours under her roof.

Only her real anxiety to see her eldest son married, could have kept her nimble tongue from allusion to the subject; but though a great talker, she could be silent when her own interests or her children's were at stake; and she perceived Jeanne's unconsciousness with something like awe, realising the simplicity which it denoted.

The Duchess knew very well that the unconsciousness was real and not assumed; no woman can be deceived on such a point by another; and she felt almost a maternal tenderness towards the girl as she realised it.

"I have always wished for a daughter," she thought, "and here, for a wonder, is one that would suit me down to the ground. No modern, anæmic young woman, all nerves and excitement, but a nice, quiet, gentle creature, come of a healthy agricultural stock; with an historic name, as it appears, into the bargain; and best of all, the prospect of a really suitable marriage *dot.*"

For Mr. Valentine had told Dunham, and Dunham had told her Grace's maid, who had in turn informed the Duchess, of Captain de Courset's openly declared intention of sharing his unexpected inheritance, with his twin sister.

No doubt, thought her Grace, he would be

advised to do nothing quite so quixotic when the time came; but her favourite enquiry of How much? in the right quarters, had elicited the gratifying information that the late Miss Marney's gross estate had been valued at three hundred and sixty thousand pounds.

It would go hard with her if Jeanne's portion, from a young and generous brother,—who had never before owned a penny in his life, and who practically owed his inheritance to his sister,—should be less than a hundred thousand pounds; perhaps even more, when young de Courset realised the magnificence of the match Jeanne would be making.

"I should be quite satisfied with that," thought the Duchess, surprised at her own moderation, "quite—because she is so exactly the kind of girl I prefer, and never hoped to find, for Denis. Why can't he make haste and propose to her? Thank heaven Dermot did not take one of his fancies to her; no young woman would look at Denis beside Dermot," the Duchess was troubled with no illusions concerning the superiority of mind over muscle in feminine eyes. "She shall not stir from here until it is all settled."

But fate was too strong for the Duchess.

Jeanne's visit had lasted ten days, (for she had needed but little pressing to prolong it), and she had spent a happy morning wandering in the old walled kitchen gardens, with Denis;

for the Duchess, who usually claimed her company at that time, had some arrears of letter-writing to occupy her, and was busy with her secretary.

It was a typical April day; light showers alternating with brightest sunshine, and the breath of spring flowers scenting the mild air.

They walked past beds of wallflowers, pale yellow and copper colour, and deep velvet red; and of blue forget-me-nots bordered with stiff little red daisies; below sunny red walls where the blossoming peach trees were nailed fan-wise; through alleys of standard pears and plums, and cherry trees white with bloom.

Against a high north wall, the camellias flourished hardily, bearing their burden of 'waxen flowers in profusion, as though the outdoor climate of the West Country were more congenial to them than the hothouses of the North. Above the wall rose the delicate spires of the young larch plantations newly green; and horse-chestnuts just uncrumpling downy leaves; the cuckoo's call sounded far and near.

"I should think you must be fonder of this place than of anything in the world," said Jeanne.

"No; for it is not my home. Cuilmore is far dearer to me, solitary as it is. It is much wilder and more beautiful than this, though alas, so much less prosperous and orderly."

"Can you not work at it—to make it grow prosperous and orderly?"

"It is the wish of my heart," he said—"If it could be done."

"When shall you go back?" asked Jeanne, simply.

"Very soon—it depends."

They took refuge in a greenhouse from a passing shower.

Jeanne stood beside a bank of arums and spirea and Madonna lilies, which rose among the palms above the lower tier, whereon brightly coloured hyacinths and gay tulips were ranged in long rows. A light green climber covered the roof, and dangled delicate tendrils above their heads; the rain pattered upon the glass, and splashed through the open doorway; and the Duke half closed the door.

They had been together and alone, very often; but never quite like this; shut into this narrow glass kingdom of colour and sweet scent, in a twilight of green foliage, and falling rain; a sudden consciousness touched both man and maiden, with that unpremeditated little action of the Duke's—in closing the door, as it were, upon the outer world; and although they were standing in such close proximity that the white cloth gown was almost touching the grey tweed coat, yet neither glanced towards the other.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it began; glistening silver drops fell from the cornice to the stone pavement of the entry, whilst the sun

serenely conquered the last of the purple clouds, and shone forth with renewed splendour.

The Duke looked at Jeanne's bright face, which reflected the glory of the sunlight in the clear transparent red of her cheeks, and in her dazzled brown eyes—and said to himself, with new born hopefulness—

“Not yet—but very soon.”

For as she had passed from shyness to perfect confidence in his presence, so he was conscious now that her shyness of him was returning once more.

Almost it seemed as though she were beginning, at last, to understand.

Jeanne blushed as she met that half tender, half mirthful look in his blue eyes, and said hurriedly, “It has stopped raining, let us go home now,” without knowing why; and indeed scarcely knowing what she said.

But as they went their way home over the wet paths, wherein the sun reflected itself from a thousand miniature lakes and gleaming pebbles—the song of the birds sounded as no concert of the woods had ever sounded in Jeanne's ears before, and evoked joyful echoes in her very heart.

They walked in silence; and in silence parted in the great hall; thus affording a happy illustration of the proverbial blindness of love; for by this time Jeanne was perhaps the only woman in Challonsleigh who did not know that she was

the probable future Duchess of Monaghan; and Denis the only man who had any doubt as to what her answer would be, when he should actually utter the proposal which had so often trembled upon his lips.

Both were content, for the moment, with that vaguely blissful condition which precedes the declaration of first love, and seldom altogether survives it. So that instead of coming to an immediate understanding with his companion, the Duke sought the privacy of his study, whilst Jeanne flew up-stairs to her own room, that she too, might be alone with her happy thoughts, and her budding hopes, and the bewildering tumult of her suddenly awakened heart.

She did not know, as she entered her pleasant room, with the gladness of the spring in her hurrying pulses, and the brightness of the April sunshine still dazzling her brown eyes, that she was leaving her youth upon the threshold—and shutting the door upon it, for ever.

She crossed the room, humming a song, but her song died on her lips as she took up a telegram which lay conspicuously upon the dressing table.

O. H. M. S.

Deeply regret. . . . telegram received from Bohotle reports your brother Captain Louis de Courset . . . missing. Without doubt killed in action.

MILITARY SECRETARY.

Dunham entered from the communicating room and found Jeanne standing still with the telegram in her hand.

"It came an hour ago," said the maid, "and I brought it up here for you, thinking it might be important."

"—Louis is dead," said Jeanne.

She did not faint nor scream, only looked at Dunham; and presently sat down in the arm-chair, feeling a little sick.

She heard Dunham asking somebody at the door for brandy, and thought she laughed in the old woman's face when she returned; but it was only a pitiful ashy smile that Jeanne gave. How could brandy possibly help her? Yet when she had obediently swallowed the mixture Dunham put authoritatively to her lips, she found that it helped her.

Her knees ceased to shake, and the mists cleared away, and she understood that the telegram was a reality.

"I know now why poor people take to drink when they are miserable," she said suddenly to Dunham. "You get strong, and you understand. But it all seems a long way off, and as if it did n't really matter."

Dunham was shocked when Jeanne said this, describing what she really felt, instead of what she ought to have felt.

But the effect that she described was so momentary, that it was barely worth describing at all.

"I must write to Uncle Roberts at once," she said, and went to the writing table.

Dunham stood watching her; not knowing what to do, but very sure that somebody must be written to at once, and relieved that her young lady should be able to do it.

Jeanne took one of the strawberry-crowned sheets of note paper, and began her letter.

"Dear Uncle Roberts,

"I am sorry to tell you that Louis is dead—"

the written words looked to her so absurd that she laughed aloud, and Dunham became alarmed for her reason.

"You had better send a telegram, ma'am—or let me—and perhaps your good uncle would come to you, Miss Jane, for we must go home at once," said the poor old woman, and she suddenly broke down herself, and began to cry pitifully.

"Do not cry, Mrs. Dunham. What are you crying for?" said Jeanne, jealously. "He was nothing to you."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LONELY LADY STILL MORE LONELY

"For gold the merchant ploughs the main,
The farmer ploughs the manor.
But glory is the soldier's prize,
The soldier's wealth is honour."

BURNS.

UNCLE ROBERTS sat in one of the gilt and brocaded Louis Seize chairs of the morning-room at 99 Grosvenor Square; with his hands crossed upon the knob of the market umbrella he held between his knees. He wore his rusty old great-coat, which he had refused to leave in the hall, despite Hewitt's anxious persuasions; and he had put down his old round hat upon the delicate blue cover of the Book of Beauty.

He was in a state of agitation indescribable; and Jeanne forgot her astonishment at seeing him in London at all,—in her awe at beholding a man who was usually so stolid and immovable thus beside himself.

His light blue eyes stared at her miserably from the forest of red-grey hair which surrounded his weather-beaten face; the wretchedness of his

look and of his tones appalled her in the midst of her sorrow; his tears—the rare and difficult tears of a man who has not wept since childhood, filled her with reverence as with pity.

“I been to the War Office. I done what I could,” said Uncle Roberts, trembling, and unconscious of the drops that were falling over the unkempt beard and whiskers that Louis and Jeanne had so often deplored to each other. “You seen the papers this morning?”

“Yes, I have seen the papers.”

“They could tell no more than was written on the papers. It seems there ain’t no hope of seeing him no more in this world. They sent ’un on a wild-goose chase and killed ’un. And all for nothing.”

“Uncle, oh Uncle! You must not talk like that. It makes it so much harder. He was doing his duty. You always say a man can do no more,” she cried in anguish. “He has laid down his life for his King and country, as—as his father did before him.”

But her efforts died away into choking sobs.

“And he was only twenty-five, and all his life before him,” said Jeanne, and she sank on her knees and wept as she had not yet been able to weep; for the familiar presence of Uncle Roberts brought back to her the memory of Louis at home—on the farm—and opened the fountains of her tears.

The sight of her agony did more to restore the old man's self-control than all her attempts at consolation.

He stretched his arm out, and laid his rough hand not ungently for a moment on the brown head. Then he rose, pulled himself together, and walking to the window, blew a trumpet blast into his red cotton handkerchief.

The storm of Jeanne's weeping passed, and she too, controlled herself, and smoothed her hair about her little ears, and confronted her uncle, with pale face, and dimmed and sunken eyes.

A dozen newspapers were scattered about the room; each had been scanned in desperate hopes of some fresh item, some hint of a possibility that the disaster was not final—that those who were missing might yet be recovered.

But the same heading—dreadful in certainty—the same clear and appalling details were reported in all.

SOMALILAND DISASTER

Ten Officers and 174 men killed

and here was the list, and the name of Louis de Courset in black and white; and among the other brief pathetic paragraphs, was the one which summed up the history of his short life, so far as it concerned his country.

"Captain Louis de Courset had served on the Indian frontier and during the Boer War. For his services in South Africa he was twice mentioned in dispatches, and received the D.S.O. He was in his twenty-sixth year."

All the rest—for Jeanne—was summed up in that portion of the main telegram which was headed: *All died fighting.*

" . . . kept back enemy's forces until no more ammunition. . . . at last enemy's forces overwhelmed square and annihilated all with exception of 37 fugitive Yaos."

"What are you going to do?" said Uncle Roberts.

"There is nothing to be done. I have been waiting, and waiting, and waiting—for him—all this time, and it was for nothing."

This was indeed the feeling of the whole household.

A dreariness indescribable had descended upon them. Nothing had been settled since their old lady's death. They had all been waiting, with Jeanne, for the return of the heir. And now he would never come.

"Will you come home?" said Uncle Roberts. She shook her head.

"No, no. There might be—oh Uncle, I am praying day and night there may be—some

more letters. The last had no messages—nothing special. But perhaps later—he may have written just before the—the disaster—with some presentiment.”

But this was a flight beyond Uncle Roberts’s powers of imagination.

“What good can letters do now?” His head sunk on to his chest. “I never thought to outlive the lad,” he said almost angrily.

Then as though the words led him into another train of thought, he asked suspiciously,

“Has that lawyer chap been nigh the place yet?”

“Hewitt went round to Mr. Valentine—Dunham said he must—directly we came home,” said Jeanne. “But he has not returned from his Easter holidays yet. He is in Switzerland. Some one else came round from the office, but I said I would see no one till Mr. Valentine came home. He is very kind and he knows about everything. He will tell me what to do.”

Uncle Roberts looked uneasy.

“I ’ve no faith in lawyers; nor yet I ain’t no match for them. Still—I don’t like to leave a bit of a girl like you, to fight them all alone,” he said, in troubled tones.

“There will be no fighting,” said Jeanne, with a wan smile. “Aunt Caroline trusted him.”

“Ay, I daresay,” rather contemptuously.

Jeanne sought for an argument more likely

to convince her uncle of Mr. Valentine's probity.

"Louis—had heard all about him from a brother officer. He wrote that he trusted him, too."

"Did he? The lad had a good head," said Uncle Roberts, and his brow cleared. "I 'll warrant he would n't say so without cause."

"If there were—any difficulties—there is my Cousin Denis," said Jeanne, wearily. "He brought Dunham and me home last night. We were staying, as I wrote you, with his mother."

"Ay; the letter was a bit long, but I read it all through. I don't hold with dukes and duchesses," said Uncle Roberts, gruffly, "but if they 're relations, you 're very right to be civil to them. Blood 's thicker than water. When you 're tired of 'em all you can come back home." No doubts assailed his honest mind but that Coed-Ithel must always be home to little Jeanne. "If they can be of use to you, so much the better. I doubt you 'll be cheated out of all this fine fortune the poor lad was to have got," he said, heavily. "'T will be nought but a burden upon a bit of a girl like you."

"Do you mean that—that it is me it—all belongs to now," said Jeanne, "I never thought of that."

"Who else—'t was left to him outright."

"How shall I know what he would wish me to do with it—" said Jeanne weeping; then her face was suddenly illumined. "Oh, how could

I have forgotten. He said—there was a letter which he sent to the Bank long ago, with his Insurance policy. I was to read it only if something happened. Mr. Valentine has it now. That will tell me what he wishes—but no—no—it can't, for it was written long before poor Aunt Caroline died. It will not help me—but at least, at least, I shall see his dear writing once more."

"Did the lad insure his life?"

"Long ago, that the debts he left behind him might be honourably paid," said Jeanne, proudly, "and oh—Uncle, I may tell you now, he said I was to get the best horse that money could buy for you besides. He wanted to show you how grateful he was for all you 'd done for him. Oh, Louis, Louis, you left nothing undone, ever in all your life, that you could think of—"

"I don't want no horse," said Uncle Roberts; but he cried as he said it. "What did he want with debts? Could n't he a' wrote to me if he was n't able to pay his way as he went along?"

"Oh, Uncle, was Louis one to ask—?"

"If I kep' him short, 't was for his good. I was brought up to believe a man should earn his bread—" said Uncle Roberts, and his voice shook. "God knows I grudged him nought."

"You did everything for him," cried Jeanne, and she came and knelt beside her uncle, and laid her wet cheek against his beard. "You gave him his start in life, as a kinsman should—"

do you think we would either of us forget it?—and after that—what shame is there in honourable poverty for a soldier? But it would have been shame for an officer and a gentleman to take your hard-earned money and play at being rich. Louis was never one to do that. Oh thank God he leaves a name unstained—unstained—” she sobbed.

Uncle Roberts went back to Coed-Ithel and Jeanne was alone once more.

In a darkened room, with head aching and cheeks burning from long hours of bitter, hopeless weeping—she lay; listening to the ceaseless jangle of hansoms, and the alternate nearing and dying sounds of horses’ hoofs, that came to her through the open window. As she counted each chime of the clock, she had a wild feeling that she must be waiting still—for the bell that would never ring—the hansom that would never stop—the tread that would never come up the stair.

Presently a step did sound on the stair, for the Duchess had come to town, and would take no denial, but forced her arbitrary way into Jeanne’s presence.

Yet perhaps, it was well she did so; for of the mixture of motives that prompted her action, Jeanne’s innocent eyes only discerned one; and that was the honest sympathy which prompted her warm, motherly embrace.

"Poor child, poor little Jeanne."

"Is there any fresh news—? Has anything more—"

"No, no. Denis has made every enquiry. Alas, there is nothing. Nothing left for you, my poor child, but to mourn your hero, and be proud of him." The tears in the Duchess' eyes were genuine. She kissed the burning cheek, and drew the aching head on to her ample bosom, petting and soothing Jeanne as though she had been a child.

"But you can't stay here alone, my love," said the Duchess presently, in her authoritative voice.

"Yes, yes, indeed I must; until I get his letters, and know if there was anything he wished—The lawyer has not come home yet. I am better here. I shall grow braver when I have had time to face it. I shall be able to attend to—to business when Mr. Valentine comes."

With a marvellous effort—but the stake at issue was so great—the Duchess held her tongue.

"I am coming down-stairs—to-morrow," said Jeanne. "Only Dunham thought it would be the best thing for me—to have one more day—to rest—up here."

"And I came to disturb you. But I won't stay—poor little thing. Only remember, if you want me, I will come at any time. I am in Park Lane, close by, you know. And Denis is thinking of you day and night."

"He is very, very kind," faltered Jeanne. She closed her eyes for a moment, and the Duchess did not guess that she was reproaching herself passionately for her happiness on that bright spring morning—was it only three days ago—when Louis—Louis, had she but known it, was lying dead in the desert.

"Oh, let me die, oh, let me die," moaned poor Jeanne, in her heart.

She came down on the morrow and faced a worse ordeal than the visit from the Duchess; for a card was brought to her scribbled over with Cecilia's pointed writing.

"Surely you will see an old friend, dearest Jeanne?"

"Oh yes, I will see her; why not?" said Jeanne, with dry eyes.

She felt as though she could weep no more. After all, what did it matter what Cecilia said?

"I heard the Duchess of Monaghan had been let in, and I was sure if you could see *her*, almost a stranger, you would not refuse an old friend like me," said Cecilia, who knew nothing of Jeanne's visit to Challonsleigh.

"It is very kind of you to come," said Jeanne, dully.

Cecilia looked at her almost with awe. Jeanne

seemed to have lost her prettiness, and her fresh and youthful look.

Her cheeks and lips were pale, and there were hollows beneath her brown eyes, stained and reddened with long weeping.

A note of genuine sympathy sounded momentarily in Cecilia's voice.

"Oh, poor, poor, little Jeanne. Will you come and stay with me? Joseph is away, so we should be quite alone. I am sure I should be very thankful to have you, for I am nearly as lonely as you are," said Cecilia, shedding a few tears.

"Thank you very much. It is very kind. But I must stay here, I am waiting for Mr. Valentine," said Jeanne.

"Well, I won't press you against your will," said Cecilia; with her handkerchief to her eyes, "for I know what you must be feeling by what I am feeling myself."

"Thank you," said Jeanne.

Cecilia began to recover herself, but still cried a little at intervals.

"I can't tell you how shocked I was—nor how grieved. It reminded me so—these things always do—of my own loss. You know, I told you I lost my baby—a boy six months old—pneumonia."

"Yes, you told me," said Jeanne.

"It makes one able to feel for others more, having been through just the same thing oneself," said Cecilia. "Not but what this is worse than

ordinary death—all so blank—no funeral—nothing.”

“It makes no difference,” said Jeanne, speaking with dry lips.

Oh, why had she let Cecilia in?

“You would not say so,” said Cecilia, sobbing, “if you knew the comfort—of having—their grave to cry over—and keep nice and tidy. It may not be much consolation, but it is something.”

“I daresay it might be to you. I should not feel it so,” said Jeanne, in a hard voice.

Cecilia’s sobs took from her every inclination to weep; and she felt only a strong desire that her friend should go, and that speedily.

“Well—I am glad to see you are able to keep up,” said Cecilia, “for I was half afraid you would be like me. I was utterly prostrated.”

“No, I am not utterly prostrated. I am able to keep up.”

“Yes. People take things so differently. But of course I was *there*. That makes a difference. Perhaps it is better when one does n’t see them, after all.”

“Perhaps it is,” said Jeanne.

“Have you seen the Duke?”

“No.”

“What do you suppose made the Duchess call?”

“I don’t know.”

“I suppose—” Cecilia hesitated. Was it too

soon to talk of such things? Really, when there was no funeral, it was very hard to tell. It must have happened on the 17th, according to the papers, ten days ago. But then Jeanne had only known it four days.

She looked at the set white face, and decided it was too soon to mention such matters. Besides, it was quite certain. He would have left everything to his only sister. Jeanne would undoubtedly be very rich.

"You look so tired that I don't think I ought to stay," said Cecilia, with a sudden outburst of renewed sympathy. "I only came to tell you how very, very sorry I was. Good-bye, dear. If you want me you have only to drop me a line, or send a message."

She pressed her friend's hand, and went away at last.

The Duke did not come.

Jeanne knew that he called each morning and evening at the house, and asked how she was, and whether there were anything to be done that he could do—but he never asked to see her.

"Nobody understands but Cousin Denis," thought Jeanne.

She remembered, but almost as a dream, that hurried journey from Challonsleigh, and that he had put her alone into the carriage with Dunham, and travelled to town himself in another com-

partment, that she might be free to indulge her grief unseen.

Throughout the journey it was he who watched over her comfort, and yet never obtruded his presence, and scarcely spoke to her.

But every thought of the Duke brought with it a fresh access of self-reproach.

"How could I! How could I! Rejoicing in the sunshine, so full of brightness and happiness,—light-hearted—and my boy in that burning desert, marching to meet his death. I did n't think, I never thought. He has been in so many dangers, and come so safely through."

That her self-reproaches were unreasonable made them no less severe.

They poisoned the secret well of her happiness, and rendered the recollections of those bright spring days intolerable.

She never doubted but that the Duke divined her thoughts. His perceptions were so acute; his sympathies so delicate—he was gentle as a woman; far more gentle, indeed, than any woman she had ever known.

She put her hands to her eyes as though to shut out the memory of the grave fair face, the kind blue eyes, the expression of melancholy raillery as of one who for a long time had only looked on at life—half amused, half mournful.

Ah, how could she think of Denis—what was he to her—when her twin brother, comrade, and

idol of a lifetime, who had no place for any one but her in all his brave, faithful, loyal heart—lay dead in Africa!

A little parcel with a note was brought to her.

It was addressed in the Duke's clear, minute handwriting.

"I am sending you a miniature. I think it may comfort you, even though I fear it must pain you to have it now. Anything you do not like in it can be altered. I took the photograph you gave me to an artist some time ago, and gave him what directions I could from your descriptions, but it only came home last night.

"DENIS."

She tore off the wrappers and looked at the miniature. It was like and unlike, as such paintings usually are.

The eyes were the eyes of Louis; but the face, copied exactly from the last photographs he had sent, was the face of a graver and older Louis than she had ever known, and the moustache made it almost as the face of a stranger.

"And yet, oh yet, how glad I am to have it! I will put it with the other miniatures," she said; and suddenly realised, with a dreadful pang, that Louis was now numbered with that company of the dead, whose portraits, cold and smiling,

hung round the walls of the silent gallery above.

She felt alone indeed.

She realised as she had never realised before that Louis had been to her, in all her past life, the only reality in a world of shadows. Among the figures who had moved upon the horizon of her limited view, the only one who counted.

The discovery comes to many of us whose horizons may be crowded with thronging figures,—that very few of them are real, so far as we personally are concerned. What the others think may be interesting, or amusing, or false or true, but it does n't really matter to us; for they move across our lives like phantoms in a dream. They talk to us and we reply,—the words mean nothing; we meet them and smile, and part and smile again; for our little landscape is neither the brighter nor the duller for their absence. They suffer, and we would help them if we could, for who would see humanity suffer and not weep? Yet our heart of hearts will never bleed for them.

But for the few, how different!

Their lightest word, how fraught with meaning—for us; their thoughts revealed—how sacred; their companionship, how satisfying to our lonely souls; and the silence of their absence—how unbearable!

And when those beloved spirits vanish, in their turn, from our horizon into the Unknown whither we may not yet follow—then how that horizon darkens; how hopeless the longing—how drear the outlook—how empty the world!

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST LETTER

"WHILST venturing to express to you my deep sympathy for the terrible blow you have sustained," wrote Mr. Valentine, "I wish to inform you that I have directed that a letter addressed to you, and entrusted to my care by your poor brother, should be immediately delivered to you by special messenger from our firm. As regards his will, which is also in our charge, it will be handed to you, as executrix, whenever you choose to apply for it; but I hope to be in London twenty-four hours after you receive this letter, when I will, if you please, call upon you immediately, as I have news of great importance to communicate to you; for which I have reason to hope, that your poor brother's letter will, in some measure, prepare you."

Jeanne, white to the lips, broke the seal of the enclosure, which accompanied Mr. Valentine's letter, forwarded from Bedford Row by special messenger, in accordance with the directions mentioned.

The envelope within was addressed to her

by that hand which would write no more. She opened the letter: it was dated from Cape-town, August, 1900,—nearly three years ago.

"You will never read this letter, my darling Jeanne, unless something happens to me before I see you to explain why I have acted as I have done, and kept it secret from my beloved little sister.

"I have married Anne-Marie-Charlotte de Courset; the only daughter of the late Henri de Courset, and the only living descendant of Charles, the Chevalier de Courset who remained in the French Navy when our great-grandfather emigrated to England; and if you would know what she is like in face, look at the miniature of our dear Chanoinesse; but if in character,—why, she is 'très dévote' (and you may look that up in the dictionary, my wee little Jeanne) and also, in her own sweet way, a bit of a mystic; and so beyond the power of such an ordinary mortal as I to fathom—I can but worship and wonder.

"Her father was killed (or died of his wounds) fighting at Boshof last April by the side of poor de Villebois-Mareuil; and as soon as she heard of his death she came out to South Africa to find his grave; defying all the difficulties, and overcoming every obstacle placed in her way. But when you know her you will understand. While others think (or talk)—she acts.

"She heard of a de Courset in hospital at Kim-

berley, and inspired by God knows what wild hope of finding that there had been some mistake—that her father might be yet alive—she flew there on the wings of love and hope—oh what an angel come to seek a poor mortal, she seemed to me,—and how do you suppose,—that having found her, I could ever let her go? . . . I was nearly convalescent, and I got leave and slipped away here, and married her quietly in the chapel of the convent where she was staying, and before the French Consul. . . .

“Now if I had written this piece of news straight away to you, as I was sorely tempted to do—I know as well as you do, that between Uncle Roberts’s horror at my marrying a foreigner and a Roman Catholic,—and your anger—perhaps, who knows?—with your poor unstable brother, who has broken his solemn promise to you, and he knows it and deplores his weakness on his knees, and begs you to forgive him, though I am afraid he does n’t repent as he should—between all these conflicting emotions, and the certainty of your preconceived dislike for my wife, and your conviction of her complete unworthiness, (which you know and can’t deny you are feeling at this moment) I wonder how much chance of a welcome my beautiful saint and queen would have had from you all?

“Not to mention that the life at Coed-Ithel and the ways of our beloved uncle, would completely bewilder and upset her, without me to act as a buffer, so to speak. For though she is perfectly

simple, yet she is also, 'très grande dame,' in her way, my beautiful Anne-Marie.

"If on another hand you and Uncle Roberts hear that I have a wife and she does n't come to see you—why what another hullabaloo once more. So all things considered in my poor crazy brain—half crazy with joy and pride to have won the one woman on earth whom God created for me alone—I have determined that silence is golden. . . .

"But in case bad luck steps in, as it has an ugly knack of doing in South Africa just now, and prevents me from carrying out my happy plan of fetching my darling back from her own country, (to which, alas, she has already flown) and hiding her in London until I have talked over both you and dear old Uncle Roberts, (and you know I could do it, my silly little Jeanne) why then—why then I have no resource but to write my confession now and send it to safe keeping, that you may hear it at least from me, dead or alive, and from nobody else.

"So if you ever read this, my Jeanne dear, I shan't be here to know whether you forgive me or not, which makes me all the more certain that you will do it—and that you will remember that my wife is part of me, and the best part; and that I love and reverence her above everything and everybody in this world; and you will take her to your heart, and never be jealous nor sick nor sorry concerning my love for her; because Love is Love, and we cannot help its mastery even if we would.

"With this, I draw up a short will.—Ah me, ah me, that I should have so little to leave! But I hope there will be a few hundreds over out of my thousand pounds' insurance, after paying my debts, and buying Uncle Roberts his horse; and I appoint you sole executrix, for I know naught of French formalities and have no wish to make legal difficulties to add expense; and I divide all my property equally between the two who are nearest and dearest to my heart, my darling sister and my beloved wife. But my debts I leave to my little Jeanne d'Arc alone, for I know it would go to her heart that any other should pay them: and for the honour of the family, as you used to say when you gave me your new desk, etc., to take to school, and kept my shabby old things in its stead, the wretched provision I leave my wife must be as large as we can make it; though, thank God, she is not dependent on that, but has a competence of her own, and lives in great state and luxury with her old servants on about twenty thousand francs a year. Her home is not far from the Château de Courset! Which now belongs to a good little bourgeois—(Oh if I could hear her benevolent tones)—of the Boulonnais. I write her address on the back of this letter.

"Now, of course such a pauper as I had no business to marry at all, but blame me who will, what care I, so that you are on my side? For with such love to inspire me, I should be a fool and an idiot not to get on, and I shall but strive

the harder, for her sake, to do my absolute best with the chances God gives me. Feeling as fit and as jolly as I do now, for I am practically all right again and hope to get back to duty at once, it is difficult to write very seriously, my Jeannie dear, and after all, why should I try? If I am killed, I am killed—and there's an end of it. All the best and bravest fellows I know, have led the way.

“‘End thy journey in content, just as an olive falls off when it is ripe, blessing Nature who produced it, and thanking the tree on which it grew.’

“Which reminds me that I gave my copy of M. Antoninus, translated, to a Boer who was wounded and a prisoner, a fine fellow and able to read English, and he said to me a few days later: ‘Captain, this man has written down all my thoughts.’ About the best and simplest criticism old Marcus Aurelius would have wished, I should think, to evoke.

“But I try once more to put myself in your place in case you read this, and fear terribly to cause you sadness, my little sister. Somehow I can’t bring myself to fear anything for her; she is too far above me, in the calm certainty of faith which is hers, and at which I look on amazed, but reverent I hope; as who would not be, that had watched an angel pray?

“Anne-Marie has a lion-heart; but you, my little Jeanne, I would fain bid you pluck up courage,

and remember that the longest life can last but a few years; a few more, or a few less, what does it signify?

"I believe it is D'Israeli who says 'grief is the agony of a moment: indulgence in it is the mistake of a lifetime.'

"Take all the joy that comes to you in life and be thankful for it; and if you want to know what are my feelings—why, I would like you never to go into mourning for me, and to laugh whenever you mention my name, but above all to know that, though I am Anne-Marie's devoted lover and servant and husband to command, I am yet also, for ever and ever, your brother that loves you.

"LOUIS DE COURSET."

Oh, were they only written words, or was it her brother's merry, tender, mocking voice that rang in her ears as she read? Everything was changed. Her grief was no longer that pure and undivided anguish of sorrow all her own.

Love, pity, and jealousy, grief and disappointment, all had their share in the tumult of fierce emotion which was beyond anything Jeanne's gentle breast had ever known.

Louis was not only her brother, her hero and idol, her twin-spirit,—he was also the husband of Anne-Marie.

While she had thought of him as dying with only her image in his thoughts, only her pictured

face in his haversac, only her love—the love which she believed to be all in all to him—in his faithful heart;—his last vision had been that of his “saint and queen,”—of her whom he loved and revered “above everything and everybody in this world.” And her name, perhaps, the last upon his dying lips. How much had she known of Louis, after all? Of the Louis who had kept this secret from her, whilst she had poured forth her very soul in her faithful letters to him? Of the boy who had become a man, during the long years of his absence?

He had failed in loyalty, failed—failed—thought Jeanne, gazing into the silent empty room in that dry-eyed desolate misery that hurts the very soul, unlike the tender sorrow which can be poured forth in tears, softening and healing as it flows.

In proportion to her unthinking and absolute trust in him; in proportion to the idolatry with which she had regarded him, and the simplicity which had enabled her to retain her childish belief in his infallibility—she suffered now.

Because he had broken his word to her, because he had withheld his confidence, because he was not the Louis—half soldier, half archangel of her dreams; but a mere man after all.

The love of a sister for a brother stands apart from every other love in the world, if but for this cause—that it is the only affection which can truly

survive and withstand the administration of home-truths.

The most tender of parents are well aware that such must be sparingly administered indeed, if they are to retain the love and the confidence of their offspring; whilst if not Nature, at least civilisation forbids a child to communicate his opinion of their merits or demerits to the authors of his being.

The most romantically attached husbands and wives know that, if the mirror of truth he held up too often to the weaknesses of human nature, the illusion on which all romance is primarily based must vanish. The lover dare not blame his mistress over-much, lest love should be drowned in resentment; nor must the friend treat his friend's feelings roughly lest he lose his friendship.

But the brother may say what he will to his sister; may deride her absurdities, label her faults, repel her caresses, scatter her prejudices; and if she loves him, she but clings the closer.

The relationship, at its best, is the perfection of human comradeship; with all life's earliest memories to sanctify it, and every hope and ambition for the future to lend it an interest which can only increase with years.

Jeanne loved and blamed and pitied Louis all in one—but like lightning, her resentment flashed upon the image of Anne-Marie.

It seemed to her that she had always known of this woman's existence; she felt as though a long-dreaded enemy had arisen at last and snatched her brother from her; so that he was no longer her own, even in death.

Ah, but what were his words?—his words that he had written with such careless certainty that, blame him who would, his sister would be on his side:

"So if you ever read this. . . . I shan't be here to know whether you forgive me or not, which makes me all the more certain that you will do it."

"Oh, with all my heart and soul I forgive you, Louis," cried Jeanne, weeping.

"And that you will remember that my wife is part of me and the best part. . . . and you will take her to your heart, and never, never be jealous nor sick nor sorry concerning my love for her; for Love is Love, and we cannot help its mastery even if we would. . . ."

There came to Jeanne, suddenly, a memory of halcyon days, scarcely past; of a radiance she could not deny to those bright April hours; of her bitter self-reproach for the happiness she had dared indulge whilst Louis was in danger; nay, whilst Death had already claimed him for its own. Death which he feared so little; for it was not possible for any one, knowing Louis, to think

of him as fearing death, apart from his own words penned in the fulness of life and young love.

He had always thrown himself eagerly into his varied pursuits, working strenuously at whatever lay before him, and never pausing to count results.

Was this philosophy? thought little Jeanne, or was it carelessness? Did it mean that he thought too little—or too much—to fear death?

She could not tell. Human nature is apt to undervalue the greatness of even those fellow-creatures whom it holds dearest. Jeanne realised humbly that of the inner depths of Louis she had known little since his earliest childhood. There were subjects, of which, boy-like, he had seldom spoken; for which perhaps, the little sister had thought him wanting in reverence; but it appeared that, at last, this quality had been aroused in her light-hearted brother.

He had "watched an angel pray," and the angel had been Anne-Marie.

"Remember that my wife is part of me—and the best part."

She put her lips to the letter, and locked it away with his miniature; looking at the face of Louis, and reading now, as it were, the meaning of that new purpose and determination written on his handsome brow.

Then slowly, slowly she moved to the *escritoire*

and sat down before it, and took up a pen—to write to Anne-Marie.

With the very action a little comfort came; a little lightening of the darkness of her grief. There was something to be done for Louis after all.

It was in every sense a difficult letter to write, for in spite of her studies, poor Jeanne's French was as yet very far from perfect. But with her grammar and her dictionary beside her, she toiled over it, through the hours of the long, bright afternoon, patiently making one copy after another.

It was Anne-Marie's home to which she was inviting her to come, since Louis had said that they were to share and share alike in all the property he left behind; though little dreaming, when he wrote, how great and rich a property it was to be.

"Si vous viendrez," wrote Jeanne, in her best round hand, and most surprising French, *"je vous prendrai à mon coeur comme il a écrit, et je ferai ma mieux être une soeur à vous. Mais c'est je qui va payer ses dettes ; pour il les a fié à moi."*

As she finished at last, and paused, pen in hand, to consider doubtfully how to address the envelope to her brother's wife—the door behind her opened.

The windows of the morning-room were thrown

up to their fullest extent, letting in the freshness of the May air, and the noise of the season's traffic; and thus she had not heard the bustle and commotion of voices, in the hall outside; but she heard very distinctly indeed the announcement which Hewitt made, almost at the top of his voice, in a tone of mingled wonder, incredulity, and triumph,

"The Marquis de Courset."

CHAPTER XX

LE MARQUIS DE COURSET

Life must be reaped like the ripe ears of corn;
One man is born, another dies."

EURIPIDES.

A LITTLE boy, scarcely more than a baby—unmistakably a little French boy, in a white tunic tied just above his knees with a dull white sash—stood on the threshold of the morning-room. But Jeanne, in her bewilderment, scarcely looked at him, or took in the significance of the announcement. She was overcome by the certainty—the instant conviction that thrilled through her whole being—that the tall figure behind the child, in deepest mourning of crape draperies and flowing veil, was Anne-Marie.

Anne-Marie to whom she had been writing all the afternoon.

"You did not attend us, Mademoiselle?" said a sweet voice, in hesitating, careful English. "But I did write, I wrote—to the lawyer, to M. Valentine, that it was to-day we would arrive."

The wife and sister of Louis looked at each other;

each, woman-like, divining the impression she had made.

"She is not like her brother," thought the wife.

"She is older than Louis," thought Jeanne.

Anne-Marie, with a hand on either shoulder of the little boy, waited—proudly it seemed, for she had a noble and majestic face and figure—in the doorway.

"Won't you come in?" faltered Jeanne, with beating heart.

It was not the greeting that she had pictured to herself that afternoon. But the opportunity had come upon her so suddenly that she could not rise to it.

"Mais oui," said Anne-Marie, with a winning gentleness and a dignity indescribable, "if you welcome us, we will come in."

Then as Jeanne's face grew whiter and whiter, instead of expressing the kindness for which she had hoped, she clasped her hands together and cried in distress:

"Vous avez reçu sa lettre?"

"Yes, yes—I have his letter," said Jeanne.

She made an agitated step forward. But she was faint and sick with long weeping, and she had scarcely touched solid food for days, from sheer inability to swallow.

She felt herself failing, knew a strong soft arm about her, and heard a calm authoritative voice issuing orders in broken English.

Her unconsciousness was momentary; a piercing cry of "Maman, Maman," broke the spell, and Jeanne found herself on the sofa, and perceived that Anne-Marie was beside her, with the little boy clinging to her skirt, and burying his face in her black draperies.

Jeanne sat up, and put both hands confusedly to her head as one awaked from sleep.

She looked at the fair mournful face beside her.

It was the face of the Chanoinesse in the miniature, grown older, sadder, and graver.

The marked eyebrows, expressive hazel eyes, and curved beautiful mouth were the same, and the raven hair was drawn from the same broad brow. But the Anne-Marie of the miniature simpered and ogled, and looked merry and arch and frivolous all at once.

This Anne-Marie was serious and noble of expression; the shade on her face was too deep to have been cast by a recent sorrow, however severe. Patience and resignation looked forth from her serene, beautiful eyes.

"I demand your pardon, mademoiselle," said Anne-Marie, "to have come upon you too suddenly." Her voice was sad, and calm. "But it was his directions that I followed. He said, if anything happens, wait two days, that she may have the letter. Then write to M. Valentine that he may warn her of your coming; then go to her, taking our son, and wait not. I did write;

I marked "private," as he bade me, upon the letter, and so soon as I had—these—" she touched her draperies, "I did come. It was soon; indeed terribly soon, to leave my house, and make the journey. But what would you? He had desired it, and I could but follow his wishes, and write to M. Valentine to warn you, as he had said."

"I was not warned," said Jeanne, faintly, "but I see how it was—your letter was marked private, so it was not opened, but forwarded to Mr. Valentine. He is abroad. And I did not know—I did not know—" she cried piteously, "that Louis had a son."

"Mr. Valentine knew," said Anne-Marie. "Louis wrote to him of his marriage, and of his son, when the news of his fortune came. But he was even then sailing for the Somaliland, which was, he told me, on his way home. He had been silent so long he said he would wait yet a little while to tell you all himself, that you might understand. So he forbade also that Mr Valentine should speak his secret."

She looked anxiously at Jeanne.

"It is terrible for you—to learn it thus," said the sweet voice, unsteadily. "I see it well. But he said that his son—would console you for all."

She lifted the child on to her knee, and for the first time Jeanne saw the little face.

The baby looked at her with great blue eyes fringed with black lashes, and they were the

eyes of Louis; he smiled roguishly though timidly—and the smile was the smile of Louis.

"Louis!" she breathed, afraid to frighten him.

"Dis ton nom, mon fils—" said Anne-Marie, "dis le donc vite."

"Petit Jean."

"Il s'appelle Jean-Louis—d'après sa tante et son père," said Anne-Marie, softly. "C'est son père qui l'a voulu. Tu vas nous pardonner, n'est-ce pas, *ma soeur*?" and she held out her hand with a gracious, almost royal, gesture, to Jeanne, as who should say, Could woman grant you greater compliment than to let her only son be called by your name?

Jeanne rose from the sofa,—not to fling herself into the arms of her sister-in-law, as the wife of Louis, marvelling over the coldness of the English temperament, perhaps expected,—but to put into the fair hand a freshly written letter.

"Oh, read it, please read it," she cried wildly, "for though it is written in bad, bad French, it will tell you all—all that I do not know how to say."

As Anne-Marie read, with wet eyes, and the tenderest of smiles flitting across her beautiful mouth, while she pressed the little round head of *petit Jean* to her bosom,—Jeanne felt as though the strain she had been enduring were suddenly

relaxed; a subtle sense of relief and consolation became apparent to her.

The motherly presence of Anne-Marie, the baby face of the little boy with the roguish smile and black eye-lashes, seemed to pervade that mournful empty room, so that it was mournful and empty no longer.

The thought came to her that her oft-expressed wish had been (however sorrowfully) granted. She was not alone, but the member of a family. The little family of mother and son—the ever sacred relationship—belonged to her because it belonged to Louis.

"Oh, come, come to my room and rest after your long journey, and let me bring you tea or whatever you would like," cried Jeanne, kneeling to embrace the smiling child as tenderly as the most impassioned foreigner could have desired. "And let me tell them to get his nursery ready for petit Jean, and your room for you; for it is Louis's house that you are in, and you have come home, Anne-Marie."

Jeanne presently sought Dunham with her explanation, satisfying the old woman's curiosity as speedily and briefly as possible, and without giving herself time to dwell on her own mortification as she explained:

"Yes, yes, it is my brother's wife—and his little boy, and Mr. Valentine knew all about it,

but he—*he* wanted to bring them to me himself, so he would not write to tell me he had married in South Africa; but I have a letter telling me all, Mrs. Dunham. There is no mystery about any of it. We have only to think how to welcome her and make her feel she is at home in his house," she said breathlessly, "and the little boy—"

"I never had no doubts from the moment I set eyes on her," said Dunham, whose suspicions of the intruders had vanished almost instantly on beholding the amount of the baggage, the dignity of the lady, and the respectability of her suite. A man, and a maid; besides the nurse resplendent in cap, cloak, and long ribbons, carrying the little boy.

The news of the arrival had flown over the house like wild-fire, and the various members of the establishment were crowding and peeping on the stairs.

Only Hewitt maintained his immovable composure, and stated his conviction of an imposture.

"To a fortune like this, claimants is sure to turn up," said the great man, rendered suspicious by his knowledge of the world, and his extensive reading of the newspapers.

Dunham's hurried interview with her young lady took place in the hall, and in whispers, lest she should be overheard by the strange servants, who were waiting patiently in the background for further instructions; but Dunham had

waited, it appeared, for no instructions, and acted in contempt of Hewitt's doubts, on her own responsibility.

"I 've told them to prepare my poor lady's room, Miss Jane. Me and Mrs. Pyke—we felt it must be so. We couldn't ask *her* to climb the stairs to the room you got ready for the poor young gentleman. Indeed it would n't be right; nor suitable."

She curtseyed to Anne-Marie, as she appeared in the doorway.

"Where are—my servants?" said Anne-Marie, smiling at Dunham, but always with her sweet and gentle air of command. "Alphonse!"

"Me voilà, Madame la Marquise," said a plaintive voice, and a small clean-shaven, black-haired, blue-chinned valet appeared, and bowed to his mistress and to Jeanne. Anne-Marie placed her son in his arms as a matter of course; but M. le Marquis was snatched from them jealously by his *nou-nou*, who started forward from her seat in the background.

A violent altercation immediately arose between the two, in French too rapid for Jeanne's comprehension, but their mistress silenced them.

"Taisez vous donc, je vous en prie."

"Bien, Madame la Marquise."

"The maid is upstairs, muddarm," said Dunham, with subdued zeal; imitating the accents of

the others as best she could, and dropping her old-fashioned curtsey in great agitation.

No doubts nor hesitations, no reflections upon foreign titles, nor contempt of foreign nobility were here. Jeanne had been nobody in her brother's house; even her father's name was ignored, and she was only Miss Jeanne. But from the moment she set foot in it, Anne-Marie was indisputably and instantly the mistress of the house; she was Madame la Marquise,—a great lady—taking homage as her due, and issuing orders calmly as her undoubted right.

The slighted dignity of the *ancienne noblesse* was avenged in her person. It never occurred to her remotely that she could be anybody but the Marquise de Courset; she the wife (alas! the widow) of the head of the family,—of the young chieftain of her father's race; a race still honoured, still remembered in its glorious traditions, in the country of the Boulonnais where Anne-Marie had been born and brought up, and where she held her own dignified and respected position, though she was not rich, and almost alone in the world.

"The property of Madame la Marquise," said Alphonse, who spoke a little English, being the son of a courier, and who added to it as speedily as possible, that he might boast the more, "has been in the famille de Courset for thousands of years so long as France itself has existed have

there been de Coursets dans mon pays à moi. It is my ancestor who still superintends the ménage of Madame la Marquise, and my grandfather her son, who does the garden—and cares for the cows. For I too am of the Boulonnais," he said with great satisfaction.

He was inordinately jealous, and permitted no one but himself to answer the electric bell, which now sounded with considerable frequency in the ears of the astonished household.

It was extraordinary to perceive how much change, and bustle, and commotion, the installation of one little boy created.

Jeanne forgot entirely the sad and gloomy memories associated with poor Miss Marney's bedroom, when she entered presently to find housemaids hurrying in and out with mattresses to be aired; Alphonse unstrapping and setting up a little cot; and Mrs. Pyke (shaking more than ever, but determined to have her say) sending hither and thither for fresh curtains, and herself carrying to the wash-stand an armful of the finest towels her linen-room could boast.

Before the fire the baby's bath was laid upon a snowy blanket, edged with gay blue ribbon, and on his *nou-nou's* lap sat petit Jean, amused and interested at the commotion about him, with a little face bright as the May sunshine turned upon them all, and blue eyes shining like stars, in their setting of long black lashes.

Yet the thought could not but return to her—Is this all? this little, laughing, unconscious creature all that is left to us of Louis?

Of Louis with his tried strength and hard-won successes; his soldiering and his learning; his knowledge born of hard work in camp and field and study; and all the thousand experiences that go towards the making of a noble manhood.

Is that all wiped out—and all to begin again, as it were, from the very beginning, in the person of his son?

But in the cheerfulness of the room such reflections could obtain no mastery over the healthy, natural instinct of womanhood,—of wonder and delight in a baby.

In a moment Jeanne was on her knees before him, worshipping with the rest.

"Thou wilt remain with him here while he sleeps. Thou wilt not leave him for an instant, lest he wake in a strange place, and have fear, Madeleine?"

"Soyez tranquille, Madame la Marquise."

Downstairs Hewitt, disgusted to nausea with the folly of the feminine portion of the household, maintained his strictly neutral attitude towards the invaders.

"We don't know who they are, nor what claims they have," he said, sternly, "and till something is proved, I for one, sets my face against all this fuss and turning of the place upside down;

and so I shall tell Mr. Valentine, as soon as ever I sets eyes on him. What 's a little boy? One would think no one had ever seen such a thing before; and all the women ready to eat him up. It makes me feel savage. Walking in as though the whole place belongs to him."

"And so it will surely, if he 's the poor Captain's son," ventured William.

"Who knows whether he 's the Captain's son, or anything about them? Dropped from the clouds in a four-wheeler," said Hewitt, gloomily.

But the Irish footman was carried away by the excitement around him, and secretly defied his chief: lending every assistance in his power to Alphonse; and conversing with him in broken English under the impression that he was thus picking up the French language, with surprising ease and rapidity.

Anne-Marie put aside all thoughts of her fatigue and, perhaps, of her desire to be alone, and to think and to weep in her own chamber, and sat up talking with Jeanne half the night when all the household had gone to bed, and when petit Jean lay sleeping in his cot beside the fire.

They talked in whispers, not to disturb his peaceful slumbers; and thus Jeanne learnt that her sister-in-law had outraged the opinion of her neighbours, and even her own—by leaving her

retirement in the first hours of her widowhood to obey her husband's behests, and seek his sister.

"But *he* thought so little of *les convenances*," she said, "was I to regard them above his wishes?"

She had a gift for terse and picturesque description, and presently Jeanne felt as though she realised the whole *entourage* of Anne-Marie's long girlhood—her home in the French village—her visits to Paris with her beloved father.

"For I was almost thirty years old when I married," she said with great simplicity and frankness. "What would you? We received, naturally, many applications. Mais je n'ai jamais voulu quitter papa! Et enfin, c'est lui qui m'a quittée."

Her father had only lived for his motherless daughter, but he had the friendship of a lifetime for the gallant de Villebois-Mareuil, and being likewise unable to conquer the fighting instincts of his race, had chosen to accompany him to South Africa.

"Papa had fifty years; but what would you? He was persuaded in spite of all that one could say that his experience would be the more valuable to the Boers; and his health was perfect."

In a few words she set before Jeanne the difficulties and fatigues and disappointments of her own later journey, undertaken in defiance of all warnings bestowed, and continued in the face of all rebuffs and refusals.

She described, unfaltering, that first meeting with Louis, gaunt and haggard from enteric fever (and of that, too, Jeanne knew nothing); their mutual attraction; her loyalty and affection aroused for the head of that ancient family, of which she had believed herself to be the last mournful representative; their love and hasty wedding.

"That I should have married thus!—but again, what would you have?" said Anne-Marie, "in war there is no time for ceremony; and he was not one to be denied."

Jeanne knew very well that Louis was not one to be denied, and that his influence was paramount over those who loved him.

Of all these things Anne-Marie spoke, but of her sorrow not at all. She could no more have helped being silent over this than Jeanne could have helped babbling—tenderly and tearfully—of hers. And yet it would have been hard to say which of these two women loved Louis the best.

CHAPTER XXI

ANNE-MARIE

THE Duchess of Monaghan was almost beside herself with indignation when she heard, some days later, of the appearance of the dead soldier's widow and child at 99 Grosvenor Square.

Her feelings were such that her son could with difficulty restrain her from proceeding at once to the house, and then and there forcibly denouncing them as impostors.

"Is it likely that if the poor young fellow were really married, his own sister should know nothing of it? People of this kind always turn up when a large fortune is in question. Look at the Claimant! There is a case in point. And that poor girl knows nothing of the world we live in, nothing at all. She will be doing something foolish and quixotic, and ruining everybody, herself included," said the Duchess, incoherently. "Monaghan, you must speak out at once, and put a stop to it."

All her prudent reticence was lost in lively apprehension, and even Denis could no longer be

blind to the fact that his mother had detected and shared his hopes for the future.

"I have no right to interfere," he said coldly.

"You ought to have a right by this time. And you must see how terribly important it is. Three hundred and sixty thousand pounds besides the Marney collection," said the incautious Duchess, betraying herself afresh with every word she spoke. "Surely even if her brother was married he must have made a large provision for her, after talking of dividing it all. Surely he must have left a will of some kind. If not,—if this impostor succeeds in proving her claim, don't you see that the widow and the son would get it all?" she cried with tears in her eyes. "The trustees would have no power to provide for the sister that I can discover. She would have just nothing at all."

Denis did not explain to his parent that in such case Jeanne would have exactly as much as he had supposed her to possess when he had first made up his mind to marry her if he could.

"I am so fond of her—she is so exactly the very person I should have chosen for my daughter, that the blow would be doubly severe," said the poor Duchess, appealingly. "I cannot give up my hopes yet. I cannot bear to think that all our plans should be knocked on the head like this, and the whole thing become impossible—utterly impossible, all in a moment."

But the Duke's fair face was inscrutable; and she could not read his intentions there, try as she might.

He escaped from her presence as soon as he could, only to turn his footsteps in the direction of Grosvenor Square.

On this occasion he did not merely enquire after Jeanne, but also sent in a message to ask whether she felt able to see him.

The answer was in the affirmative, and his Grace was ushered immediately into the morning-room.

The Duke had not seen Jeanne since that hurried journey from Challonsleigh, a fortnight ago.

He was shocked at the change in her appearance.

Her days and nights of weeping had banished the pretty red colour from her cheeks, and dimmed the soft brown eyes; and the outline of the round face was perceptibly thinner.

He took her hand in silence; looking at her with grave, concerned blue eyes.

"Cousin Jeanne, is this news true?"

"It is true, Cousin Denis. Louis married, in the summer of 1900, in South Africa," she said, "and his wife is here, and his son. And oh, Cousin Denis, she is Anne-Marie."

"Anne-Marie!" said the Duke, bewildered.

"You remember that I showed you the miniatures of my family—of the de Coursets," said

Jeanne wistfully, "and the poor Comtesse Anne-Marie, the first prisoner of the Revolution?"

"Yes, yes, I remember."

"Her brother Charles lived in France, and married, and had children, but most of them became monks or nuns. And this Anne-Marie is the only living descendant. She is the daughter of the poor de Courset of whom Professor Hogg-Watson told us, the one who was killed at Boshof, by the side of General de Villebois-Mareuil."

"And she married Louis?"

"She went out to South Africa—to find her father's grave. Late last night we sat up talking, and she told me of her long, long journey, and of the difficulties she had—but she seemed to think nothing of them—to get to Boshof. Every one told her it would be impossible, but she said nothing was impossible to a child who loved her father. And—and she heard of a de Courset in hospital, and for one wild moment thought there might he a mistake——"

"Poor thing."

"But she found Louis," said Jeanne, softly.

Her bitter feelings, so foreign to a gentle nature, had all melted away under the pathos and simplicity of Anne-Marie's recital, and of her description of Louis, wasted and suffering.

"He would not mention that fever to me—I thought him just at that time rather careless

about writing regularly—little thinking he was ill and hiding it from me for fear I should be anxious,” said Jeanne, for her loyalty had conquered her resentment. “She says if she had not thought him dying she could not have stayed even then; but she had told him who she was, and, as he says in his letter to me—how could he let her go?”

Now that she had seen Anne-Marie, Jeanne felt that she could picture it all to herself: the hospital tent, and Louis, in his weakness and weariness, suddenly transported out of his surroundings by the vision of that beautiful, serene face that embodied the romance of the past and the present in one.

The Duke was silent. He felt that, however romantic the marriage of Louis might have been, his reticence towards his only sister, concerning it, could not be explained away.

“Cousin Denis,” said Jeanne, timidly, “I am going, if you please, to fetch Anne-Marie. She knows you are a cousin; and I have explained to her how very good you have been to me all this time of my loneliness. I am sure she will see you. She is so self-controlled, but I cannot be like her,” said Jeanne, with a very watery smile. “Indeed it would be very odd if I could, for she is a most beautiful, stately person, just what I should imagine a queen ought to be. She likes to talk to me of Louis, and I like to talk

to her. But she never talks of—of her own sorrow, and yet—and yet you cannot see her and doubt that it is—all her life.”

“If you are sure she would n’t think me intrusive—that it would not be too much for her,” said the Duke, hesitating.

He had no wish to see Anne-Marie, but every wish to please Jeanne.

“No, it is not too much for her. Mr. Valentine came this morning, and she saw him, and we are going together to his office to-morrow as he wishes.”

“Was he aware of the marriage?”

“Yes, Louis wrote to him when he received the news of his inheritance, and told him in confidence of his marriage, and—and—that he had a son. It was only I—who did not know—” she said, flushing deeply, “and Uncle Roberts; and we have not yet decided quite how to break it to him. It might be best for me to go and tell him, for letters are not much in his way.”

The Duke was silent again. He could not express his feelings, but his face showed him indignant for the mortification she bravely tried to hide; and Jeanne divined his thoughts.

She went to her little desk, and opened it, and brought out a worn blue envelope with a broken seal.

“Cousin Denis,” she said softly, “I would show his last letter to no one in the world but

you. But I cannot bear that *you* should misunderstand Louis. You will see it was written long ago. . . . just after he married. Read it—and you will understand.”

As she put it into his hand, he detained hers, raised it to his lips, and kissed it. But the action was so grave and so gentle that it was more an expression of sympathy—the first he had dared to show her—than of love.

“How was it I could ever have been so blind—so foolish—as to look down upon *him*?” thought Jeanne, colouring deeply as she left the room. “He is always the same—kind and noble, and thoughtful of the feelings of others. Surely everything that any woman in the world could wish a man to be.”

And she went in search of Anne-Marie; delaying her descent for a few moments, in order to give Denis time to read the letter.

“It would be so much more pleasant, if M. le Duc will consent, that, since he is of our family, he should conduct us to-morrow to the office of this M. Valentine,” said Anne-Marie, with her little air of mingled persuasiveness and command. “Is it not so, my sister?”

Jeanne assented. It was very clear to M. le Duc that she would consent to most things that could be proposed by her sister-in-law.

He had not wished to see Anne-Marie, but

his prejudices were conquered before she had even spoken.

She was, as Jeanne had said, at once so simple and so stately.

No doubt her beauty counted for much in the influence she exercised over all who approached her; but still more, perhaps, her serene and dignified sweetness of character, which was made manifest in her whole bearing and expression.

But the faint purple shadows beneath the beautiful hazel eyes suggested, nevertheless, to the quick perceptions of the Duke, midnight vigils, and a pillow watered with tears; the fair complexion was almost unnaturally pale in contrast to the black draperies. He divined that the apparent self-command of the Marquise was hardly won.

"Anything in the world that I can do—" he said.

"You have been good to my sister," said Anne-Marie, and she looked at him keenly. "But yes—she has not failed to tell me of your goodness; even—my husband—spoke of it in his letters to me. She would have been always alone, but for you, in this great house—so great, so *triste*. Now she will be alone no more; for it was his wish that I should protect her."

The Duke's fair complexion rendered his increase of colour particularly noticeable. But Jeanne reflected his momentary embarrassment with

so deep a blush, and such obvious and painful confusion, that a less observant person than Anne-Marie could hardly have failed to perceive it.

The Duke's blue eyes met her enquiring gaze.

Anne-Marie paused, and appeared to consider. Then she turned to Jeanne, and addressed her with peculiar gentleness, in her slow, careful English.

"I would like well to show my son to M. le Duc. Will you not go yourself, ma sœur, to find our petit Jeannot, and present him to our cousin?"

Jeanne, thankful to escape and hide her blushes, very gladly replied that she would, and quitted the room; and the Duke was left alone with his new relation.

Whether Anne-Marie, as appeared probable, had chosen to give him this immediate opportunity for speaking to her in private, of deliberate design, or whether she was merely actuated by a sisterly desire to screen and shield the obvious confusion of Jeanne the Duke did not pause to discover. But he availed himself without a moment's hesitation of the opening her consideration afforded him.

His embarrassment vanished with the departure of Jeanne, and he addressed himself to the Marquise very gravely and courteously in her own language; though had Anne-Marie possessed a corresponding sense of humour to his own (which

she did not), she would certainly have discerned the latent twinkle in his blue eyes.

"I understand, madame, that you are now in a measure the guardian of your sister's interests?"

"Mais oui, monsieur," said Anne-Marie, with a winning smile, and a dignified inclination of the head.

"Then—" said the Duke, with the little bow which Jeanne had thought old-fashioned, but which appeared the most natural and appropriate salutation in the world to the Marquise, "I have the honour to apply to you for permission to address myself to my cousin. A marriage with her has long been the dearest wish of my heart."

There was no shyness and no hesitation in the Duke's manner now. He spoke with a decision and manliness unmistakable.

"It is as I divined," said Anne-Marie: she gave him her left hand as a royal favour, and he kissed it with respectful ardour. "Monsieur le Duc, you have acted with that propriety which distinguishes all brave and honest men,"—she paused, and added—"in ordinary circumstances. Receive then the assurance of my approval, as I am persuaded you would have received it from the lips of my beloved husband; and with it the expression of my conviction that you will make the happiness of his sister."

"I thank you infinitely," said the Duke, bowing.

Then he descended somewhat precipitately from his French stilts. "You will understand that I have said nothing to *her* yet."

"It goes without saying," said the Marquise.

"You will then not allude to the subject until I have ventured to ascertain the sentiments of my cousin?" he faltered. "I demand your pardon, madame, but you are perhaps not aware that our English customs differ very considerably—she might think—I am not even sure whether—" he floundered miserably.

"Soyez tranquille, monsieur," said Anne-Marie, in soothing tones. "I am enough well acquainted on the contrary, with the usages of your country. Here are nearly three years that I study them, with your language, incessantly. You shall rely on my discretion."

The Duke was a lover, but perhaps less selfish than lovers usually are; he thought the sad smile of Anne-Marie adorable; and her sympathy for others, in the midst of her own grief, touched him deeply.

"Chère madame," he said, with an impulsiveness not habitual to him, "forgive me, forgive me. I wonder how I can have dared to obtrude upon you just now—wishes and hopes, that perhaps I must be content to indulge in silence for some time longer. I know too well that it was not at this moment I should have spoken."

"Ah, monsieur," she said, very simply and

earnestly, "is it not then, in her sorrow, that the little one has most need of consolation?"

"Would you then counsel me—?" he said with diffident joy.

"To follow the impulses of your heart? Mais oui, monsieur."

"And you think it possible that she—that she——"

Anne-Marie's smile, though sad still, was yet so expressive that he was minded to kiss her hand a second time, but refrained; for at that moment the door opened, and le petit Jean made his appearance with Jeanne.

Anne-Marie was merciful as she was sympathetic, and, with a perception very unusual to mothers, she inflicted the company of her idolised son upon the impatient lover for as short a time as possible.

Petit Jean did all that was required of him; he saluted M. le Duc; smiled all over his sunny, handsome, little face; and was finally borne away in the arms of the Marquise to look for chocolates in the dining-room.

"Jeanne," said the Duke, in hushed tones, "I have read the letter."

"And you understand?"

"I understand that your brother was a brave fellow," he said with emotion. "I am very proud to call him cousin."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," cried Jeanne. No words could have been more grateful to her aching heart. She laid the letter reverently away in the shabby desk; and the Duke closed the lid that she might lock it.

Their hands met.

"Jeanne, oh, Jeanne, is it--too soon? Must I wait yet a little while longer?"

"Will time make any difference to such sorrow as mine?" she said passionately.

The Duke knew that it would make a difference; for though he was no older than Jeanné, he was as wise for his years as she was childish for hers; but he did not stop to think of this now.

"Oh, Jeanne! If my love could comfort you—if my love could bring you the happiness of which he writes——"

"Love is Love," she quoted in a whisper, "and we could not help its mastery even if we would."

"Would you if you could?" said the Duke, tenderly; and as he took her into his arms, she knew, tired and heart-broken as she was, that the intolerable heaviness of her sorrow was lifted; and that in the midst of grief she had found the happiness—the joy in life—which her dead hero had bidden her take with thankfulness whenever it should come her way.

And that this comfort had come to little Jeanne now, at the moment when she so sorely needed it, she owed, though she never knew it, to Anne-Marie.

CHAPTER XXII

MADAME LA MARQUISE

"As one lamp lights another, nor grows less,
So nobleness enkindleth nobleness."

J. RUSSELL LOWELL.

"Is Madame de Courset at home?" asked the Duchess.

"I believe the Marquise has not yet left her room, your Grace," said Hewitt distantly.

For the assurances of Mr. Valentine had finally dispersed the doubts of Hewitt, so that he made haste to show his zeal in the service of his new mistress, by resenting any implied slight to her importance.

It was his instinct, apart from training, to be obsequious to duchesses; even though they should elect to call at unsuitable hours, on foot, and badly dressed, and more obviously in a hurry than was at all compatible with ducal dignity; but the latest domestic *on dit* had acquainted Hewitt with the fact that there had been a somewhat heated controversy between the Duke and his parent just before the young man's latest visit to Grosvenor Square; and Hewitt had put

his own construction upon the only detail which had yet transpired—that her Grace had been discovered in tears, after the departure of her son.

“Of course she ’ve been and took against the match now there’s a heir turned up,” reflected Hewitt. “But I can’t see as she can *do* nothing, storm as she will, since the Duke’s of age. Mrs. Dunham must have been right when she declared that she was sure and certain something was settled yesterday, when he called on Miss Jane; or her Grace would n’t never have turned out of her bed at this hour of the morning, and come round here seemingly in the worst of tempers.”

Therefore Hewitt determined to uphold the dignity of his family by employing a tone of the most distant respect towards the Duchess, instead of exhibiting the reverential urbanity demanded by her exalted rank, when inviting her to enter.

The Duchess waited for no invitation, and heeded the intonations of Hewitt as little as she heeded the colour of the doormat over which she stepped.

“Tell Madame de Courset I will wait,” she said, stumping into the morning-room, of which the door stood open, without further ado. “And tell her—here, you had better take up my card—that I should be glad to speak to her as soon as possible.”

“How very strange that the Duchess should

ask for you, and not for me," said Jeanne, surprised.

"No, I do not think it strange," said Anne-Marie, as she rose from the carpet on which they were both kneeling, at play with petit Jean. "It is on the contrary what I should have expected, though it is perhaps rather early—" she glanced at the clock, "half-past ten. But there is yet two hours before we must be at the office of M. Valentine."

She smoothed her raven hair, adjusted her flowing black draperies, and went down-stairs to meet the mother of her sister's fiancé.

It is certain that the Duchess expected to see no such tall and stately figure, no such gracious dignity and winning beauty, as suddenly confronted her when Anne-Marie entered the room and closed the door behind her. She returned Madame de Courset's composed and graceful salutation with an agitated nod.

The poor Duchess was neither young nor slim; she was much upset by a wakeful night; she had walked too fast and too soon after breakfast; and the morning was excessively warm.

It was impossible that she could rise, as she would have wished, to the occasion.

Anne-Marie, acting with the calm, decisive promptness to which Louis had referred as her characteristic, opened the conversation without embarrassment.

"I have expected, madame, to see you, since yesterday."

"Expected me?" panted the Duchess, in amaze.

"That you should call so early—that you should lose no moment—even this is to be expected. I too am the mother of a son, and can understand," said Anne-Marie, with dignity inexpressible.

Then the Duchess found breath.

"Last night—late last night, my son informed me, that after applying to you, *to you*, for permission, he had asked your—your sister-in-law to marry him."

"It is true," said Anne-Marie. "He had the delicacy to apply first to me, who stand in the place, alas, of her brother, her natural guardian. I am very well aware that in your country this is not necessary; I know that here a man need not even ask the permission of his parents to marry. Myself, I think this a very wrong and terrible thing."

"It is *terrible*. I am glad you see it in such a sensible light," said the Duchess, feelingly.

"But in this case—for my sister has told me of your amiability, of her stay in your house and your maternal solicitude—she needs not to have doubt of your approval—of your gladness to accept her as a daughter?" said Anne-Marie; but now there was a questioning accent in her voice.

The Duchess hesitated.

The explanation was not easy. She had, in

a thousand ways, invited Jeanne to take for granted that such a daughter would be more than welcome to her. She had been not only affectionate, but effusive, during her stay at Challonsleigh; and above all during that last short and moving interview, when she had supposed that Jeanne was about to inherit her brother's large fortune.

"Has something occurred to make you change—that you wish it no longer?" asked this clear-sighted questioner.

"Nothing—nothing, so far as Jeanne herself is concerned," said the Duchess, feeling she could say no less. The tears rose to her eyes. She was not unfeeling; and she felt it, besides, very hard that she should thus be forced, of cruel necessity, to appear to be a mercenary woman. That she *was* rather a mercenary woman made it none the less hard.

"Madame de Courset," she said, half-ashamed to find herself appealing, apologetically, to the very person whom she had yesterday continued to denounce as an impostor, despite her son's assurances that the family lawyer had been aware of the marriage of Louis, and the existence of his son—"no one in the world—no one, I can assure you, that I have ever seen, would suit me better as a daughter than little Jeanne. She is personally, and in disposition, all I could possibly wish her to be."

"Mais oui, elle est très douce," said Anne-Marie, as though she had already divined and understood the somewhat arbitrary character of Jeanne's prospective mother-in-law.

"But my son—" said the Duchess, moving uneasily beneath the calm gaze of those clear eyes, "the Duke, madame—in spite of his rank—is a very poor man."

"C'est toujours ainsi," said Anne-Marie, sympathetically. "In our class we do not make money—we spend it. What would you? Cela se comprend!"

The Duchess was petrified. But she knew not how to disagree with Anne-Marie, seated calm and reposeful before her; so loftily and unmistakably a representative of the *ancienne noblesse*; so entirely and innocently unaware that there could be any doubt of her own complete equality with the Duchess of Monaghan.

"M'yes," said the Duchess, faintly.

There was a moment's pause; the elder lady struggling to recover herself, and the younger politely waiting lest the elder should wish to speak first. Finding this not to be the case, the Marquise came to the rescue of the Duchess.

"Happily," she said, graciously, "though the fortune of M. le Duc is not equal to his position, nor (you will permit me to add, madame) to his merits, this slight misfortune need not, in this

particular case, present any obstacle to the union of our families, since the *dot* of my sister will be so large—if it is this consideration that is troubling Madame la Duchesse—?”

“It is, it is,” cried the mother of the Duke, almost weeping. “I daresay you will think badly of me; one is not supposed to care about such things, but——”

“Mais pas du tout!” said Anne-Marie, surprised. “It is surely the duty of a mother to occupy herself of such matters! If not she, then who? In France, we should think it strange indeed if she had neglected to inform herself, by every enquiry, of the prudence of the marriage of her son.”

“I have always said they manage these things better in France,” said the Duchess, wiping her eyes.

She was really a pathetic figure, as she sat on poor Miss Marney’s favourite couch; her short stout form outlined against the delicate rose-coloured cushions; her broad face flushed and heated; her grey front (which she had replaced in a hurry on her return to town) more than a little awry, beneath a bonnet so old and so unfashionable that her maid would fain have thrown it into the dustbin, but that it happened to be the one her Grace usually asked for.

“Alas, madame,” said Anne-Marie, “it is not always easy, even in France, for those of our

order to marry where they would. That, also, understands itself. But in this case—the *dot* of my sister renders it possible——”

“But my dear—my dear Marquise,” said the Duchess, abandoning the last shred of supposition that this most clear-headed, sensible, and sympathetic of listeners could be an impostor. “*Has* she a *dot*? that is the question. When I asked my son last night, he could tell me nothing. He knew what the poor—her poor brother’s intentions originally were, no doubt; but he could only suppose with me, that the birth of an heir would have made all the difference. I am sure he would not have willingly trifled with my anxiety,” said the poor Duchess, again growing rather lachrymose, “but I cannot say that he expressed the interest in a question of such vital importance to him, that a young man in his position ought to feel.”

“It is very natural,” said Anne-Marie, indulgently. “The young leave these considerations to their family. They love, and they think not of such matters. But how could my sister go to her husband, and a husband of a position so great as M. le Duc de Monaghan,” said Anne-Marie, with her courteous inclination. “without a *dot*? That would be impossible indeed! These questions are for us, madame, to discuss.”

What a reasonable, what a superior creature

was this! The Duchess felt almost inclined to embrace Anne-Marie.

"Unless her poor brother left a will," she said, hurriedly, "your sister-in-law will, I believe, get nothing at all of the great fortune left by her aunt. Surely, madame, you must be aware of this?"

"Alas, madame, I understand little of your laws. It seems that one child of the same parents can be given all, and another nothing. Our customs appear to me more just. The children, brother and sister, share alike. Has a woman then less need of money than a man?"

"More need, more need," said the Duchess hungrily, "and especially when she marries a poor man."

"My husband," said Anne-Marie, softly, "did make a will, just after our marriage in South Africa; that his sister might by the law of England have her share of all that belonged to him, in case of his death. And her share was to be the half of all. This he told me, and this he wrote to my sister, and to Mr. Valentine."

"But that was before he inherited this property—before the birth of his son——"

Anne-Marie shook her head wearily, and half-closed her beautiful hazel eyes. She was growing very tired of her interview with the Duchess.

"It makes no difference—none at all," she said gently. "That is the will of my husband."

The Duchess had a heart, though it was a small one; and suddenly, though tardily, it smote her, as she looked at the pathetic young face, framed in the severe French mourning of recent widowhood. She remembered *how* recent, and had the grace to be ashamed of her intrusion, and of what now even justly presented itself to her as her importunity.

"Forgive me," said the Duchess,—her loud voice softened.

Anne-Marie smiled faintly, and made a little movement with one hand, as who should say, It is nothing.

"Forgive me; and if I might ask you—say nothing to my son of my visit here. I ought not, indeed, to have come to disturb you, but—but—oh, when your son grows up, you too, may know what it is to have to stand by watching him," she wrung her hands in a despairing burst of confidence, "—watching *them*, in my case,—do one thing after another that you would stop if you could. But no, you must not interfere, for they are *men*, and independent, though they be ever so wild or so foolish."

"Is M. le Duc, then, wild and foolish?" said Anne-Marie, in wonder.

"No, no, no. I was not thinking of Denis. My feelings carried me away," cried the Duchess. "I have other sons, less wise, but not less dear than he, poor fellows. Oh no, no, Denis is all

that any one could wish. It is for that I am so doubly anxious that he should marry and settle down and have sons of his own; if only there is enough fortune to make it possible. His conduct has never given me a moment's anxiety in all his life."

"That is what I understood," said Anne-Marie, gravely. "When I heard from my sister of the visits of her cousin, which had afforded consolation to her solitude (a consolation that would not have been possible, madame, in our country, to a young girl, though attended by so devoted a *gouvernante* as this good Dunham; but I am aware that young girls here are accorded a liberty extraordinary)—I, too, found it my duty, as you will readily figure to yourself, madame, to make enquiries. And I had the happiness of learning from the respectable M. Valentine that M. le Duc was of a character irreproachable; otherwise, as you will perfectly comprehend, I could not," said Anne-Marie, with a sad but charming smile, "have accorded my sanction to his application for the hand of my sister."

Thus was the Duchess vanquished and routed in her encounter with Anne-Marie; and so completely that it was not until she returned home that she realised, being by no means a quick-witted woman, that in spite of the serene assurance of the Marquise, nothing could be known for

certain, concerning Jeanne's fortune, until the will of Louis had been opened.

But the close of the day fortunately put an end to her doubts; when her son—who had every desire to relieve his mother's anxiety as soon as possible, and who was, to say the least, and in spite of his love, as much interested in the matter as she was—informed her that Louis had made no fresh will upon succeeding to his property, since the one drawn up and signed immediately after his marriage would, as he had instructed Mr. Valentine, answer every necessary purpose.

This divided all his property, without reference to the amount, in equal shares between his wife and sister, in accordance with his letter to Jeanne; and appointed her sole executrix.

The situation was perfectly clear, and afforded no difficulties beyond the exact division of the estate; and over this, as the Duke remarked to his mother, Anne-Marie and Jeanne were very little likely to dispute.

"No, indeed, Jeanne is far too amiable; and the Marquise is an admirable person," said the Duchess; forgetting, in her joy, that she had implored Anne-Marie not to mention her visit to the Duke.

"Have you seen her?" he asked in amaze.

"I—I called upon her this morning, Denis," said his mother, faltering.

So they perceived that Madame la Marquise could keep a secret.

Jeanne had intended to break the news of his nephew's marriage to Uncle Roberts, by word of mouth, in accordance with the intention Louis himself had expressed; but Anne-Marie, in calm consultation with the respectable M. Valentine, decided otherwise.

"To write it is better," she said. "Let there be, on this occasion, no more surprises, no more *coups de théâtre*."

"But it is so difficult to know what to write. He does not like letters, particularly long letters; and it would need a very long letter to explain it all," said Jeanne. "And one never knows how Uncle Roberts will take things."

"Then it is as well that you should not be there," said Anne-Marie, sensibly. "A man in these circumstances needs time to reflect how he will act. Time also perhaps to overcome the first burst of his surprise, it may be his anger—in fine, his emotions, and to compose himself. It is *ce bon* M. Valentine who will write of what he learnt from my husband. He will doubtless send a copy of his letter of announcement, or of such papers as may be necessary. It goes without saying that it is *ces messieurs* who will concern themselves of business. But for you, you will write of your engagement, and of your filial sentiment; and for me, I have but to ask that I may be permitted to make a pilgrimage to the home of my husband's infancy;

and to demand the blessing of his uncle for my son."

The letters were written and despatched in strict accordance with these directions; and, whatever Uncle Roberts's emotions may have been on the receipt of the intelligence they conveyed, he certainly took time to reflect and compose himself before he decided upon the proper course of action to take in the matter; for ten days elapsed before his anxiously awaiting niece received an answer to her letter; and to theirs, the lawyer and Anne-Marie received no answers at all.

"*Dear Niece,*" wrote Uncle Roberts in his usual laconic style. "*Your's to hand. I hope you may be happy in your choice, and that your Future Husband is a godly man. You will be set in High Places, take heed lest you fall.*"

"*To hear of the poor Lad's marriage was a Surprise to Sally Morgan and myself. If it had pleased God to spare him, he would have told me all Himself on his coming Home, this was not to be. I should take it kind of the french Lady he has married to bring his son to see me. Sally Morgan bids me say the Spare Room is now ready, likewise his that was, and your own.*"

"*May God's Blessing rest on you is the prayer of your affectionate uncle and well-wisher,*"

LLEWELLYN ROBERTS."

"Oh, Anne-Marie, do you see? He did not

write earlier, only because he waited till the spare room should be ready. How like Uncle Roberts."

"It is the letter of a noble, a pious, and a generous man," said Anne-Marie, reading between the lines of the homely yet dignified epistle. "He makes us no reproaches. He speaks not of his own feelings. I will teach my son to honour him, and we will make the journey together before we return to France."

For Anne-Marie withstood firmly though gently all the entreaties of Jeanne, all the arguments of Mr. Valentine, and all the invitations of the Duchess.

She would not prolong her stay in England, she said, by a day, after the marriage of her sister should be accomplished. She would return to her home.

"My son is French," she said, "by birth, by parentage, by descent. Also he shall be French by education, by sentiment, and by association. This would not be possible were he to be brought up out of his own country: which would also, to me, be exile," she added, with frankness.

The Duke declared himself on her side, and Jeanne was persuaded to see the justice of her arguments from Anne-Marie's point of view; but not all her reverence for the family traditions reconciled her to the proposal that her nephew

should grow up a stranger to the country in which his fathers had been born, and for which they had died, for three successive generations.

It was Anne-Marie who decided that the Marney collection must not be divided, but should belong to Jeanne's share of the property. The Duke rejoiced at the prospect of being enabled to examine the Dutch pictures in detail, and discover as many fresh beauties in them as he chose, for the rest of his natural life.

The house in Grosvenor Square was also to be Jeanne's; and as a set-off, the large and valuable Orsett estates were to be sold for the benefit of Anne-Marie and her son.

"For me—I will buy the Château de Courset," said the Marquise. "It is there my son shall spend his childhood."

"Is it for sale?" cried Jeanne, turning pale with excitement and awe, for the restoration of the château had been among the fondest and most unlikely dreams of her childhood.

"How very fortunate it should be for sale," said the Duke and Mr. Valentine in a breath.

"*Mais non*," said Anne-Marie, calmly, "it is not for sale. It belongs to a *bon petit bourgeois gentil-homme*. He is a brave boy, and above all a very prudent one. He is also of my acquaintance. When I offer him more money than it is worth, he will certainly not refuse me."

"No, madame, I do not think he will refuse

you," said Mr. Valentine, and he looked at the Duke, whose blue eyes twinkled responsively.

He too thought it probable that Anne-Marie would get her way.

The event subsequently justified his conviction; for the brave bourgeois retired with all possible speed from the Château de Courset, to make room for the Marquise and her son; overwhelmed by the magnitude of the sum offered him for this concession.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONELY LADY *LONELY* NO MORE

AWAY from London; from the heat and crowd of the season; the rolling of carriages and motors and electric broughams; the clatter of hansom and rattling of omnibuses in noisy streets; from an atmosphere vitiated by myriads of chimneys, and choked with the dust of the wood-pavements—to the silence of the mountains; to the pure fresh air of the green valleys after the rain; to the May meeting of spring and summer on the flowering hillsides.

At Coed-Ithel, the old stone-tiled, ivy-clasped house was no longer bared to the view of every passer-by, through the gnarled and naked boughs of winter; but was embowered and hidden in blossoming orchards holding aloft their burden of rosy bud and white bloom against a cloudless turquoise sky.

The dark yew guarding the rustic gate stood among the snowy loveliness of the pear-trees, like a death's head at a bridal feast.

Golden lights fell through the green leaves

of the oaks upon the grass, now yellow with buttercups; upon patches of wild blue hyacinths, upon violets smothered in growth, and moss-grown stones hiding the trickle of the mountain stream,—a torrent no longer.

Jeanne felt that Coed-Ithel needed no apology—no explanation from her, upon such a May-day as this.

Uncle Roberts, alas, had discarded his working-clothes for his Sunday suit; his rust-coloured hair and whiskers bore traces of a recent and liberal application of Maccassar oil; but Frenchwomen, though not less delicate, are certainly less squeamish than their English sisters and if Anne-Marie observed the strong scent of the Maccassar (which indeed she could hardly have failed to do, since she embraced her astounded relative on both cheeks before he had time to resist), she accepted it as an evidence of Uncle Roberts's desire to do her honour, and was touched accordingly.

The embarrassment of the occasion was intensified by their reception in the small and musty parlour, which was ill-adapted for the accommodation of so large a party; whereas the farm kitchen was large and lofty, and would have possessed the additional advantage of putting the farmer at his ease among more familiar surroundings.

As it was, Uncle Roberts felt almost like a

visitor himself, as he balanced his heavy person carefully on the edge of a horsehair chair, wiped his brow with his red handkerchief and told the Duke that the weather was uncommonly warm for the time of year.

Happily petit Jean came to the rescue with loud, plaintive, and reiterated demands for milk, and his frank requests being translated to the farmer, Uncle Roberts jumped up in great relief and invited his grandnephew into the dairy; forgetting his previous arrangement that Granny Morgan and her handmaid should bring a tray of refreshments into the parlour, where a space had been cleared for it among the shells and albums and fancy mats upon the centre-table.

Poor Granny Morgan, who had been waiting only for the first ardour of greetings to subside, before making her appearance according to contract, was dismayed to see the whole party pouring thankfully out of the parlour; but she forgot her disappointment in the excitement of beholding petit Jean, and the embarrassment of being embraced by Anne-Marie.

"To think of *you* being the wife of our Louis," she said afterwards to Jeanne. "Foreigner or no foreigner, no Englishwoman could have wore a better crape dress for the poor boy; nor I never saw none half so deep; and to hear her speak English just like any other Christian, fair amazed me. And the way she took her food! 'Farmer,'

I said to your uncle, when he told me her was a-coming, 'T is no manner of use for you to ask me to cook snails for her, nor yet frogs,' I says, 'for I won't ado it,' and he give me a scornful look, as much as to say, 'You 're showing your ignorance, woman.' You know his way if a body so much as opens her mouth to cross him."

The visitors would have been hard to please had they desired better fare than Granny Morgan spread before them; of home-brewed cider and perry; of tender spring chickens, early peas and gooseberries, and rich wrinkled yellow cream.

The praise of Anne-Marie won the old woman's heart.

"She took her vittles with the best of us, though I doubt she 's been used to the grandest of cooking. To think our lad should have had the face—but he was one to dare anything, and I 'll warrant he did n't ask her twice for all she looks like a queen. He had the way with him. But you mark my words, deary, her heart 's broke; and I seed her look at the little boy so sorrowful that I fair went to the back kitchen and burst out crying, for it minded me of the poor lad."

"Yes, petit Jean is very like Louis," said Jeanne, sadly. She waited for a moment, and then said, faltering, "You have n't said a word about—about *him*, Granny?"

"Have n't I, deary?" said Granny Morgan,

with well-feigned surprise. "Well then, no more I have n't, so I declare! I've been and forgot to wish you happy, my deary, so here I does it with all my heart," and she kissed Jeanne emphatically.

"But what do you *think* of him? Oh, do say you like him, Granny; for you don't know how good he's been to me."

"I should n't wonder if he was good to you, my deary; for I'm not one to judge by appearances," said Granny Morgan, soothingly, "and 't is n't always the finest fellars as makes the best husbands."

"But indeed—indeed, he is a fine fellow——"

"They says Love is blind," said Granny Morgan, lifting her hands admiringly, "and so I'm sure he'd need to be sometimes. When I heard you was to marry a grand lord, says I, here's a to-do, and however did he come for to pick up with our Jenny! says I, mazed-like. But now I've seed him, deary, why 't is all to be understood; for he's but a slip of a boy, and a lame one at that, who would be looking for a straight, comely maid to tend him like; but you shewed your sense, my deary, in taking him, for half a loaf be better than no bread; and now you'll be a lady, which all the money in the world would n't have made ye, if a gentleman had n't come along to make you one. But to think of him alongside of our Louis, oh deary me," and she wept into her apron.

Jeanne cried for company; but she blushed too, as she recognised in Granny Morgan's crude reflections the echo of her own past impressions of Denis. She too had once seen that he was little, and lame, and delicate—and had seen nothing else.

The *succès* of Anne-Marie, glad as she was to note it, was counterbalanced in poor Jeanne's eyes by the obvious failure of her childhood's friends to recognise any remarkable qualities in her betrothed husband.

The exaltedness of his rank did not impress them, because to the inhabitants of Coed-Ithel a duke was a lord, like any other lord, and one title just as good or of as little account as another, according to your principles.

Uncle Roberts objected to all titles, in what he chose to call "the abstrack"; but to show he was not proud, and that he knew his manners, and had no ill-feeling towards his niece's future husband, he called Denis "my lord" once or twice, in the course of conversation, or whenever he remembered to do so. Most of his remarks were naturally addressed to the Duke, because Uncle Roberts never, if he could help it, talked to persons of the inferior sex when a man was present; and the force of habit was too strong to be overcome.

But though he talked to Denis, he looked at Anne-Marie and at the little boy beside her; and

his face betrayed a sad wonder, and almost awe, as he watched them both.

After supper, and when petit Jean had been borne away upstairs by his nurse, Uncle Roberts seated himself in the porch, with his pipe, and smoked and enjoyed the mildness of the May evening as his custom was; and it was then that Anne-Marie, in her long black draperies, came to bear him company, and talked to him in her pretty broken English, as she sat beside him.

Jeanne, beholding her uncle absorbed in listening to those low, clear tones, stole through a side-door, with her lover. They wandered through the blossoming orchards and climbed together the rising grass slopes behind the farm, and watched the moon rise over the edge of the fir-crowned hill, whilst yet the afterglow of the sunset had scarcely died from the clear, pale, evening sky.

Her heart was too full for much speech; and Denis, divining the sadness of her thoughts, was silent too; yet knowing that his presence and his sympathy comforted her without words.

She led him presently to a seat beside a clump of oaks, near the fallen walls of a stone cot, which had stood upon the mountain before the oaks were planted, and when the grim giant yew now overshadowing the ruin was still young; and they rested, and listened to the ceaseless song of the mountain brook, and the sleepy twittering of the birds, disturbed by the rising of the moon.

"Here we used to play," she whispered, "and here Louis used to tell me all he meant to do when he was grown up—and now—what is left of it all?"

"A memory that will never die in the hearts that love him,—his share in the example and inspiration that heroes leave to weaker men—"

There was a silence, and Denis added, gently, "His son will carry on the traditions of his house."

"Yes, there is petit Jean," said Jeanne wistfully. "I thank God for petit Jean. But oh, Denis—" she crept closer to him, "he will not be mine as Louis was. He belongs to his mother, and she to him, and both to Louis. I feel it more and more each day. I have thought sometimes lately that—that even if he had come back it might have been like that. There would have been very very little place for me. They would have filled each other's lives——"

The Duke had, perhaps, already thought of this, and wondered if the little sister had been spared, in her sorrow, many a disillusion almost harder yet to bear than grief itself; but he was loyally silent concerning these reflections.

"You and I, too, will fill each other's lives. It is Nature," he whispered.

He took her into his arms, and she clung to him, and was consoled, a little consoled in the midst of her tears; which were no longer bitter, but only sad and tender.

Her utter dependence was very sweet to him, and he understood this childish human sorrow better than he understood the strange unearthly resignation of Anne-Marie,—to whom, for her part, these young lovers seemed but children, playing at love.

When they returned to the house, that the Duke might take leave of his host, and enter the fly which was waiting to conduct him to the little hostel down in the valley, they found that Anne-Marie had already retired, and that Uncle Roberts was awaiting them alone, shaking the ashes of his pipe into the kitchen fireplace.

His nature was not formed for excess either of melancholy, or of mirth; but it was easily to be discerned that something had pleased him, and he took them immediately into his confidence in the matter.

“Jenny,” said Uncle Roberts, “d’ye know what I’ve been thinking?”

“No, Uncle.”

“Why—that I shan’t have to go over to Tréf-goch, and pay another thirty shillings to old Lawyer Williams for making a fresh will, after all; as I’ll be bound he do expect. For I left my farm and all my worldly goods as I do possess to Louis de Courset, d’ye see; and under that will, as sure as I’m alive, the Louis de Courset as is sleeping up-stairs will get the lot.”

Jeanne's tap at the door of the spare room was so gentle that it passed unheard; and, very softly, she opened the door.

Petit Jean lay asleep on the narrow bedstead in the corner; and by the centre-table, with her back to the opening door, all unconscious of intrusion, Anne-Marie knelt before a crucifix.

There, also, was all that remained to her of Louis—a little row of medals, and the Cross of his Order; but he would have prized them beyond everything in the world, and she hated and treasured them.

What was left?

A photograph, a wedding ring, and a packet of letters.

Her black hair fell like a mourning veil over her white draperies; her face was hidden upon her out-stretched arms; her hands were clasped in a silent agony of supplication.

Awed and trembling, Jeanne closed the door without a sound, upon that holy place of love and sorrow. She dared not enter, nor make her presence known. It was, to her, as though the soul of Louis were keeping guard over his wife's secret anguish; as though she, too, had "watched an angel pray."

Jeanne and Denis were married in London, later in the summer, and they kept the date, place, and hour of their wedding a secret from

all save their nearest relatives, that it might be as quiet and private as possible.

Yet, when the time for the ceremony arrived, there sat Cecilia, in a front pew, with her eyes starting out of her head.

During the honeymoon, Jeanne had the happiness of beholding at last the home of her ancestors, though she was disappointed to find it no fine palace; but a plain, three-storied, green-shuttered mansion, with slated roof, and a tall poplar set at each corner; standing among the coppices, streams, and pollards of the flat, uninteresting country of the Boulonnais.

She has, however, the consolation of living in as romantic and turreted a castle as Ireland can boast; in a country not less wildly picturesque, nor less well-timbered and well-watered, than her native Wales.

The Marney Collection is displayed to advantage in wide and lofty galleries, where space and light abound, and where the owners need fear no deterioration from London smoke or fog.

The Marney thousands have restored Cuilmore, and brought peace and plenty to many humble homes. The old servants have been pensioned off and dispersed; only Dunham and Mrs. Pyke live with Jeanne, in a corner of the great castle, with a maid to wait upon them in their old age; in the evening they play double-dummy together, and think, doubtless, of their old mistress; and

wear out such portions of her wardrobe as Dunham does not still feel it her duty to hoard in cupboards, with little bags of camphor among the folds.

The Romney portrait looks down upon poor Miss Caroline's ancient harp; and upon her gilt furniture, and upon the Book of Beauty, still kept faithfully upon the occasional table next the sofa, by the orderly little Duchess; but the miniatures of the young Marquis, page to Madame Royale, of the Chevalier Charles, and the Chanoinesse Anne-Marie,—have gone back to the Château de Courset; they are the property of Jean-Louis.

And the windows of the new morning-room look out upon a wide, green park, and a rolling river, and distant blue hills, instead of into a London street.

For the house in Grosvenor Square is dismantled, and the rooms are empty. The policeman, passing on his beat, sees no more a lonely lady gazing from the window; but instead, a board, with the inscription, To be Let or Sold.

THE END





